

THE STORY

OF

DENISE

A Novel 5.25

FOUNDED UPON THE CELEBRATED COMEDY-DRAMA

BY

ALEXANDRE DUMAS.



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THE STORY OF DENISE

CHAPTER I.

THE GAMBLER'S "SAVING SUIT"

THE Palais Royal in Paris is far from being that nucleus of gaieties formerly making it the first place sought by the wealthy foreign pleasure-seekers who arrived at the "Hotel of the Whole World." Nevertheless, not a long while since, in one of those periods when the Financial Minister looked about him for a means of swelling the credit side of his budget, it was rumoured that he inclined a favourable ear to the project to revive Frascati's in all its ancient splendour. The lighter press teemed with articles re-lashing scenes at the écarté table, where beauty from all quarters witnessed the breaking of the bank by young and handsome adventurers. The suicide of the loser was kept carefully in the background, naturally, and only the glitter of gold, the ravishing notes of the coin in chorus, the

delicacies of the free supper, and the multiplied surrounding attractions dwelt upon of the "lay-out" and the roulette board.

It was not that gamblers by profession from father to son paid much heed to this often-renewed promise of being under Government license. They keep on their course, "making things smooth" with the police in that secret, effectual way which is the despair of magistrates. But the cloak, while not being thrown off prematurely, was withdrawn more than a little. Any one who pleased, on coming out of the *Français* or the *Italiens*, and turning into the dimly-lighted streets at the east of the Palais Royal, would not travel long before he could almost hear the rattling of dice and the shuffling of that terrible tyrant Fifty-two governing the world these eighteen centuries.

It was about ten o'clock at night that ex-Colonel George de Thauzette, quitting a charming wife who had brought him the very fortune he was now engaged in dissipating, all censors said, strode through a darkened door in the Rue de la Poche Nettoyée. A large man made way for him as soon as they exchanged some watchword. He mounted to the first floor, where a waiter, himself playing a game of solitaire, since it was early yet, disengaged him of his overcoat and hat. With a glance he had seen that the new-comer was not one of the pretended noblemen who blacked

their own boots in a lofty lodging and lorded it over the subordinates at the "Club des Gentilhommes-Sportsmen."

Thauzette passed through a "reading-room," where the latest papers were hardly within a month of date, into the hall of action.

It was rather desolate. There was a first performance of a new fairy spectacle at the Châtelet, and the gentlemen who were bound to be seen in the orchestra stalls and boxes to claim mention in the newspapers would not come till after a couple of acts. Already, though, the reek of cigars began to obscure the numerous gas jets which superheated the atmosphere to that degree most lucrative to the wine merchant who "financed" the establishment.

The carpet was thick, the heavy curtains closed hermetically, and hangings mantled every aperture, all combining to diminish the rare rattle of vehicles on the asphalte.

Thauzette sat down at the side on a lounge and reflected.

He was in a critical moment.

Married a score of years since to a beauty whose good looks seemed imperishable, since she was still cited as a comparison with upstarting belles, his son was of an age to reproach him, as he cynically merrily commenced to say. A dozen times the heavy cavalier

had staked his wife's portion in chimerical speculations, and saved it, with more or less gain, against all reason ; and yet, so strange were these successes, he never dared to believe in even his great good luck. After twenty years, then, he was so much the older and no richer.

The gambling table was his solace, the Exchange his diversion. As for serious occupation, "Gallant George" de Thauzette had never given it a thought. He was the man to live on *pâtés* and champagne, and seldom reminded his physician of his existence.

After months of nursing a scheme, he had favourably impressed some princes of the Course, only they required some solid feature on which his ideas might repose. If he had had but a paternal estate, a few acres, or if Madame de Thauzette's dower had been house and lands instead of Government and railway shares, thanks to the blundering prevision of her papa, the Amiens solicitor. To be sure her kinsfolk on the mother's side were of the very oldest blood ; but, then, of late years, the aristocracy with land recedes like singed cats from any proposition which would compel them to stake the heritage of ancestors redeemed after the Revolution.

Turning to strangers, Thauzette based all his chances on a new acquaintance whose coming he now awaited. Any but a gambler in heart, hand and soul would have hesitated to deceive the young gentleman who pre-

sented himself in this air of confirmed greed and vice with an unclouded brow and eyes undimmed by the reflected gas.

It was midnight. The staff were on duty, the army already engaged in conflict with that genius of gaming which the dull ancients embodied as Fortune and the practical Americans, ignoring the feminine figure, term "the Tiger."

This latest to fall under her merciless claw was named André. He was the Viscount of Bardannes, a family on record in the fifteenth century. At first warriors that seized on Norman and Breton lands, then merchants who enriched it, they became diplomatists under the later Louis and preserved both wealth and grounds. A faithful steward bought in the latter with the former in the forced sales of the Revolution, and the loyal sentiments of the Bardannes protected them perfectly when the "Black Terror" of brokers and auctioneers fell upon France at the Restoration.

At the approach of the fresh-complexioned, clear-eyed, and elegant young noble several of the hawk tribe instinctively meandered among the punters at the edge of the tables in his direction. But on seeing M. de Thauzette half rise and welcome him to a seat beside him, they drew themselves away with a vexed blink of their rapacious eyes. As for the players, their view was wholly upon the banker, as they sought to puzzle

out on his cast bronze features what point he had.

Meanwhile Thauzette had secured his visitor. Abstracted as were the others, the two might converse as in the desert.

“How’s the piece?” inquired the elder, calling for cigars and liquor by a sign which the noiselessly perambulating waiter had divined.

“I just looked in, and came away to keep my appointment. *Silly* is as brightly intelligent as ever, and *Bade* as good! Fourteen English blondes in the first row of the ‘Ballet of All the Flags,’ three Italian premières, and a Hungarian leader—what more can you have to amuse you great children the Parisians? Such a showpiece would not draw our market clerks from their desks; though, mind you, our ploughboys would certainly leave the furrow to gape and gaze with open eyes.” Thus the viscount listlessly.

“Something to tell my boy about at college when you return for the finishing course,” said De Thauzette, shrouding himself in tobacco smoke to conceal a little emotion at the remembrance of his heir involuntarily coming up just when he was entangling the young dupe.

André hid a sad look. Though he and Fernand de Thauzette were in different parts of the college, by reason of their ages, a college is a world where the

minutest news circulates rapidly. He knew as well as everybody except the principals that the youth Fernand was not highly accounted among the studious. Absorbed himself in a kind of re恩orse, Thauzette did not notice the cloud slitting over the usually joyous face. Besides, he had his plan to accomplish.

If he had conducted this boy to the gambling-table it was not to ruin him there ignobly, and for a few hundreds in loose cash! Tut, tut! He served as decoy there merely to whet his appetite for great gains upon petty ventures.

So far he had been fairly fortunate in collecting those splinters which are the small share buyers, but the future Count of Bardannes was a beam that he wished to carry away in bulk. Ten thousand are more readily influenced than one, but when that one can be gained over, how much more gratifying the success?

At the end of an hour's conversation the promoter entertained no doubt that he had ensnared his prey.

A little disturbance, rarity in these resorts, called off the young man's attention, fickle as became his years. A loser, failing to borrow the lacking funds of a friend, had cut the knot by slipping away altogether.

"A shame! an unheard-of disgrace!" clamoured the players; "we'll not be the victims of such swindling! Is this a sporting gentleman's house, or an East End hell? The house is responsible anyway! Besides,

what's a thousand francs to a place coining money like this? Governor, you are bound to make up that loss!"

The manager, Malcraft, ran up out of the nook where he generally basked in the gas like a lizard awaiting flies.

"You don't mean to say M. Lafaille has really fled?" he cried. "Well, well, I suppose we must pay. I shall come across him again."

"You'll have to outstrip him to Havre, then," observed a bystander; "he showed me a ticket for New York!"

"A 'bilk!'" moaned the proprietor, at whom all laughed, being paid for the delinquent. "If I had only known!"

"Well, if you had known he had a passenger ticket for America?" queried Thauzette mockingly, "you would have acted just the same!"

"You are quite right," returned the other reflectively; "you always see things clearly."

"A wonderful head, firm, rapid, toilsome, my young gentleman," he went on; "you could not find another such pilot in the merry life of the capital I daresay you imagine, like most, that a proprietor of sporting saloons makes no end of money! An error, sir, a grievous error! If I had not indemnified these gentlemen for a trick not of my invention, they would have betrayed me to the authorities, and to-morrow the

shutters would have been up or the police taking possession. For we are merely tolerated, you understand. Never will the Puritans let us have a license, and so contribute to the exchequer. The moment the magistrates receive a well-supported charge against us, whizz, bang ! the seals are slapped on our doors, and our good little bank, by which we all have our *fun*, will be a mere football to the police boot."

"Very neat. In short, instead of my friend and me chatting here, you remind us of our duty to make *your* hay whilst the 'sunlight' shines. Come on, André, my boy, let us risk a few louis."

On 'Change he said "napoléons," but to a count the old aristocratic name came naturally. "Louis!" He would have said "livres" to an older noble.

The two had hardly more than inserted their fingers among the loose gold pieces in their fob when an unexpected incident prevented them feeding "the Tiger."

A sharp closing of several doors with a bang, a piercing signal whistle, and a chorus of the servants, "Lights out ! stow the tools ! the police ! the police !" announced one of those *râfles*, or raids, which "the brigade of safety" now and then execute, as if to prevent newspaper readers believing they had ceased to exist.

Trained for these emergencies, an intelligent hand had already turned off the gas. Immediately the

waiters extinguished the oil-lamps, which burnt to prevent the darkness being suddenly made for a less excusable purpose.

Crash! went the table, a leg broken, and the rest overturned in a lively skirmish between the croupier and two or three non-fastidious clients who had made a dash at the bank. There was a maelstrom of jostling, snatching, scratching, and clawing men around poor young Bardannes as the vortex. A little more rustic than these effeminate Parisians, he did not hesitate to free himself from the mob, which unpleasantly suggested designs on his watch, with a couple of shoves with his fist, very much akin to fisticuffs.

But the outer door had yielded to the police, furnished with a sledge-hammer company of pioneers, and an inner door was now being attacked. The clicking of traps revealed that the cards and other implements were disappearing in secret repositories. Like a pack of chickens in a coop, the unfortunate gamblers continued to battle with one another, clinging fatally to the manager and his servants, who, unimpeded, would have fled to the roof.

It was too late!

The last barrier was succumbing beneath the sledges. Through the cracks in the panel they heard the police inspector claim admission and remove the last hope by asserting the house to be surrounded above and below.

The honourable men, who expected to be gibbeted in the newspapers next day, groaned, and the professional gamblers themselves shivered with dread. When one has cultivated his fingers to the acme of fineness of feeling, to contemplate them roughened with prison work, it is not blissful !

Nevertheless, the doom was nigh. The split wood fell away right and left, a lantern without gleamed on the red, white, and blue of the magistrate's sash of office. The police bounded into the still gloomy apartment.

At that moment the young viscount felt the tooth of misery. What would the news of this disgrace occasion in the old château? how would his mother bear the blow? with what indignation his father would receive the irritating consolations of his friends ! The pride of the oldest family in that county arrested in a gaming house, and his heretofore stainless name printed between those of the golden hell's tout and the disreputable "roper-in!"

He was about to rush upon the police and commit some rash act with the vague chance of cutting his way through--too vague for the experienced around him to cherish.

But, instantly, a powerful hand seized him by the arm, and he was impelled to the door in spite of his struggles with all his youthful vigour.

"Way for the prisoners!" shouted the voice of his captor.

Past *the commissaire*, the police chiefs, down the stairs, and through the smashed portals, he was borne, the first of the prizes in the raid.

A crowd was at the door, guarded by police in uniform and in plain clothes, working men proceeding to their tasks, night prowlers, to whom an arrest was the rehearsal of their inevitable fate, the pale-faced baker coming up from the oven for fresh air, the shop-girl hurrying out for the hot milk for breakfast.

André darted a despairing look at his capturer. A long imperial and thick moustache hid most of his face; he had the wide-brimmed hat peculiar to the agents of M. Pietri, rather than the jauntier men of M. Andrieux; a long overcoat, at a button of which hung a loaded cane—in short, nothing reassuring.

"Why do you let these gapers crowd up so close?" he cried testily to the *sergents*. "Well, don't stare yourselves, but call up that cab!"

André remembered he was expert in athletics; he thought of making a bolt of it and giving the police a run. But the wary fellow who had him by the sleeve divined his intention. He seemed to wink with stern jocularity as, like lightning, he shifted his grasp to the neck, where he took both collars of vest and coat in his comprehensive fist. The next instant, like a child,

André was lifted into the vehicle—"bundled in," some would have called the operation.

"Rue de Jerusalem, headquarters of the Prefecture!" cried the victor.

The cab dashed off at a very good round pace for a night-horse.

The moment the corner was turned, however, the arrester of André let down the front window and, in quite another voice, whispered to the Jehu:

"None of your dashed nonsense with taking us to the detective bureau; it's ten louis in your pouch to put us down in the thick of the bustle at the Central Markets."

The driver understood perfectly. They may look dull—they do look dull—but the Parisian *automédon*s have marvellous wits when appealed to by the man about town with a well-garnished purse.

But the viscount had not understood in the least. He looked in a stupor at his companion, who was, as coolly as if at his toilet table, relieving himself of the false moustaches and goatee. Then he threw off the voluminous greatcoat and showed that he had not only a topcoat under, but a second overcoat wound round him and tied by its sleeves. This had given him a burly appearance quite in character.

"M. de Thauzette?" ejaculated the young gentleman, more astounded than ever.

"The identical! Pretty little trick, isn't it? I always had this suit in a cupboard there—my 'saving suit,' I call it!—in case such a fatality as this of to-night did come round. One never knows what's next to befall! have a smoke?"

"No, thanks! I have not your nerve. I am quite unstrung!"

"Oh, you'll get over that."

"But how can I ever repay you? I was overwhelmed with grief to think of my family hearing this news—my arrest in such a shameful place!"

"Repay me, my dear boy? *we* don't do these little things for pay; it's sweet to our consciences, it's a tonic to our hearts. By the way, you might give this intelligent jarvey the ten yellow boys I promised him. Till I look in at my banker's, I am afraid I cannot score up enough."

"With the utmost pleasure."

They alighted in the thick of the marketmen, where, of course, their traces would be lost in a few seconds, dismissed the cabman, who vowed he meant to knock off *his* box for a week, and retired to a restaurant, open all night in that quarter, to recruit after so much emotion.

Thus was confirmed an ill-assorted but enduring friendship between the old speculator and the future Count of Bardannes.

CHAPTER II.

RACE WILL TELL

THE act of saving the Viscount of Bardannes gave Thauzette firmer hold than a thousand artifices would have done. He had no longer need to seduce and enchain. In all his visits to town André went straight to find this Mentor at the Club, or even on the steps of the Bourse. They went about to the play, to the Bois, to the *salons* of great ladies, and the boudoirs of the stage-beauty in fashion more like brothers than anything else. The difference in age certainly made them seem father and son; and such distasteful companionships in reprehensible resort are unfortunately not too uncommon in Paris.

Somehow or other, Thauzette at length had tried to see less of André and to induce him to be rather the comrade of his son Fernand; but the present tie strengthened and the suggested one did not seem to grow. It is needless to say that the speculator

profited by this intimacy in a business sense. He introduced the young noble to the money-lenders and bill-discounters, to say nothing of the bill-discountesses, before the death of André's parents, which occurred almost at the same time, the deep and long affection of the old Count of Bardannes for his wife making her loss fatal to him.

On coming into his property the new count found himself so enriched that he paid, without any qualms, all those heavy obligations that he had incurred, but heavier than these were his engagements to Thauzette. A good piece of his land was sliced away altogether by some company in which the promoter had committed him. Nevertheless, he did not complain, and helped him over and over again in the continual complications which pestered the man of affairs.

In the meantime if André cared to see little of Fernand at college, he was always pleased to spend an hour or two in the drawing-room, where Madame de Thauzette did the honours. Some years back that lady had seen nothing but amusement in the boy. The first time that he appeared to her he wore the same uniform as her son. Often afterwards she used to see him in fancy in that collegian's brass-buttoned coat, with his eyes wide open in ecstasy at the brilliant lady of fashion, and revolving his cap in his hands more like a ploughboy than a budding exquisite. She had

once traced a little comic sketch of him, quite a droll figure. As she drew it the young nobleman made her nearly die of laughter with being moody, sentimental, and given to poetry.

The fact was that after the lady had turned *thirty*, she was a Parisian beauty—that wonderful beauty which, in the country, would not have endured *more* than three or four seasons, but the arts of the toilet preserve it to the Parisian for a quarter of a century. They call it Satanic beauty, and something of the glow of Lucifer, Star of the Morning, shines in the eyes of its owners. Even when they go to hear a sermon they cannot kneel down, roll their eyes heavenward, and pretend to give all their attention to the preacher without distracting the eyes of more pious people. Pascal would despair, and Bossuet would turn his thunders upon them. Truth to tell, the Parisian dame cannot help being theatrical; she must have people looking at her; and, if nobody will look at her, she will gloat over her ownself in the glass. Consequently, when she does have a few stray curls down on her temple, or even a tress out of her *catogan*, do not imagine that it is an accident; she herself gave them that liberty to have an air of carelessness. Her first look at wakening is into a hand-glass, and in her dreams she always sees herself lovely.

André was, no doubt, smitten. It was a dim reflec-

tion of the entanglement of "the Countess and Cherubino," only the cherub was honourable and serious. It would remain merely a charming remembrance. She herself, though, was gratified with having been the first to make this sincere and innocent boy's heart jump. She loved at the beginning, but she was sorry afterwards that she caused him to suffer. It was a blessed thing, for it instructed him, and preserved him from more vulgar and dangerous pangs.

As her husband had been a soldier, she was doubly on her guard against carrying this condescending flirtation to a perilous point. She, therefore, went wholly with him in his increasing exertions to link André with their son. Perhaps this more natural intimacy on the part of the young men would this time have resulted favourably; but just as they were more closely connected, a divergence in Fernand's thoughts was abruptly given; and, singularly enough, André's received a shock too.

The college where Fernand was beginning and André ending terms of educational bondage was so near the Luxembourg Gardens that the schoolmates rambled about in it, out of a park attached to the school buildings.

No doubt some of our readers will have a flock of pleasant souvenirs when we speak of "the Plantation," so very charming, with its nursery and narrow walks,

creepers forming garlands between the fruit trees and rose trees, and vaulting the stone seats in its glades and coverts. It was hard to believe noisy, white-dusty Paris was nigh.

There André liked to sit and dream with a thousand projects for the future which his wealth enabled him to gratify, and which, for the most part, the elder Thauzette had suggested.

One day he was looking about him there, when a figure which seemed to have descended from a picture by Greuze passed before him at a distance accompanied by a matronly form. She was rather a child than a girl. She had blue eyes, and already well-shaped forehead, a fine straight nose, cheeks full of dimples, where smiles loved to nestle, and a little mouth with full pink lips often showing their pearls in hearty laughter.

In a word, she was ravishing.

Her whole face expressed lightness of heart, and yet energy, with some tendency to reverie. The sunbeams broken by the foliage, played upon her fair hair till they shone across her forehead like a golden halo, and gleamed on the outer circles and abundant curls rippling adown her rounding shoulders.

André contemplated her with admiration, and felt himself filled almost to choking by an emotion hitherto unknown.

She was so rare a vision that, though he often came

there again at about the same hour, he did it hopelessly.

Such pleasures are rarely repeated.

Absorbed in his own delight, he was entirely unconscious that another's eyes had also been startled by the apparition ; these were Fernand's, but there was recognition in his gaze.

The young girl was named Denise Brissot.

Brissot, her father, had been the orderly to Thauzette when he was a cornet. Grade by grade he kept pace with him as much as one could expect considering their monetary and natal positions were different.

Thauzette had become a colonel, with very vague prospects beyond, when he made the acquaintance of the future Madame de Thauzette.

Mdlle. Gabrielle de Marchangi was a notability in Paris. It was the easiest thing in the world to see her, for the spectacle of life did not suffice for her ; she was always on view at the opera, the Comédie Française, the Bouffes and Folies, the races, the private circuses, the picture galleries, and so on. Somehow, she found leisure for novel reading, and the gallant colonel of heavy cavalry appeared at some review at Longchamps as her ideal of manhood.

He was a great deal surprised that he so easily conquered.

From the moment when he secured her fortune, very

little undermined as yet by milliners' bills, Thauzette thought of giving up the military profession. This was very ungrateful towards the gleaming casque and breast-plate and streaming horsehair which had made the rich match ; but he drew so captivating a picture of the world in which immense wealth must place them that she was resigned.

He plunged, therefore, with her approval and her thousands, into the financial *mélée*.

He began by being a very busy agent on 'Change, and soon won the renown of a financier of the first rank for tact, prevision, and shrewdness. All he suffered from was the Bourse gamesters' general shortcoming—the insufficiency of available money. However, as ex-colonel he had one of those names that companies like to put at the head of their prospectuses among the Members of the Investigating Board.

Some of the undertakings having yielded "plums," he was helpful to many old friends of his salad days.

His former regimental companion, Brissot, who had a turn for accounts, was given the place of cashier in a thriving company.

During this time the attractive young girl whom the orphaned Count de Bardannes had seen in the Luxembourg Gardens and Fernand de Thauzette, resembling in age, had been growing up together.

At first Madame de Thauzette had not frowned on

her little boy having this pretty playmate, who set off his dark locks with her own golden tresses when they were out on promenade together. The children became just like brother and sister. Sometimes, when Thauzette experienced the "downs" in the fluctuating fortunes of his companies, he was glad to spend an evening with Brissot. It relieved him from the worry of the moment by recollections of their life in camp and on the field together. When, on the other hand, stocks went up, he plumed himself upon his millions, more or less in perspective, pool-poohing any idea of such an alliance. At last Brissot was notified formally, with only just enough politeness to gild the pill, that this marriage was out of the question. However, he offered him a very lucrative post in a new project which was to be the last of his scheming.

The truth was, the most considerable company he had to do with was doomed to make colossal collapse. Less inmanageable on this occasion than previously, the shareholders attacked the real directors and wasted no legal powder and shot on the sham members. Among the two or three fated to be most cruelly and persistently "annoyed" figured M. de Thauzette. For every quarter he had been confidently putting his signature to beautifully-drawn-up balance sheets, establishing in an *irrefutable* manner that the society was in perfect prosperity.

The colonel said that the bondholders were very wrong, and very unkind, and very ungrateful to be hard with him, who was only a military man after all, and might have been expected to fall dupe sooner than they to apparently unexceptionable documents.

That is a question that we are not going to delay to answer. At all events, the case came before the courts, and nothing but the death of M. de Thauzette saved him from suffering personally.

Themis, never passing for a good-looking lady, evidently had the grudge that the uncomely manifest towards the beautiful.

She certainly behaved very severely towards Thauzette's widow. Her first judgment was that the colonel's heirs and his fellow defendants should repay the shareholders a sum so large that Madame de Thauzette, for one, saw she would be reduced to poverty. Luckily, there was an appeal permitted, and she escaped being shorn to the quick. As for Fernand, who for the first time had been interested enough to watch the progress of a law case, he was for ever disgusted with Justice.

Their misfortune and the commiseration which the sudden removal of the head of the family always produces had renewed the relations of the Brissot family and that of the colonel, whom they used to see so often. Brissot again treated Fernand like a son, and was shallow enough not to think that Denise might consider

him in any other light than that of a brother. But, whatever might have been the issue with Fernand, a few months had transformed him. With the wreck of his parental fortune he gave himself the airs of the inheritor of millions. He strutted about with old captains who remembered his father, or pretended they did, in order to get his name at the back of a bill now and then. Only one tempting spirit he avoided. It was the watery-green Naiad, that modern divinity of intoxication which, in fine, held out the glass of absinthe. He thought himself dishonoured in the collegian's costume, and paraded himself in an imported English suit, conducting a four-in-hand groaning under a load of notorious women—and even worse-famed men—to the races on the select days. Soon his mother became utterly unable to meet the expense he incurred. He was probably on the brink of committing some greater crime, assuredly some less fashionable one, when chance revived the appetite born in him for the tricks and feats of the gambler. Some poor devil had accosted him in the passage on the Boulevard devoted to shady perfumery shops, vaguely lighted second-hand clothes dealers, tawdry women who dared not face the excessive gaslight of the *cafés*. It was the broken-down Malcraft, formerly proprietor of the gambling house which the elder Thauzette frequented.

CHAPTER III.

THE PASTEBOARD HEARTS AND THE HUMAN ONES

MALCRAFT had dogged the young man for a long time with his present expectation of borrowing a few coins at once, and, perhaps, tempting him into some den whence he would be glad to escape without his money and jewelry.

Fernand treated him to a dinner, became convinced over a bottle of wine that this expert could give him invaluable lessons, and made him his professor. The Greek was enchanted with his pupil. Fernand was amazed at the simplicity of the means by which "gaming sharps" have secured stakes time out of mind.

At the end of three months there was nothing for him to learn. His schooling was so profound that his trainer admitted he would inevitably succeed.

After a few experiments at clubs, where he proved a

formidable antagonist to even "the Dons" at card-playing, he prepared his cards (without any play upon the words) for a grand *coup*.

One of the very rich men who had financed his father in several of his enterprises, but who had been much too prudent not to withdraw before he burnt his fingers, had a son as dull as Fernand was acute.

His name was Augustin de Loriac ; he probably had a right to sign himself "Loriac," and we will not insist upon the "de" as he did. His son had not many feathers in his cap, though he had "plenty to fly with" (as the jokers said at the club) ; but he flattered himself he was particularly good at picquet.

Fernand played with him two or three times at five Louis the game, and let him win twice. He then arranged with him that they should have a regular battle royal for the supremacy at this old-fashioned game without any busybodies at their elbows. This contest was to come off in a restaurant after they had been to the play. Having arranged this business affair, as Fernand esteemed it, determined as he was to increase his unsteady income at the card table, the young man took up the other occupation of his life—love-making.

Of innocent play and prattle with little Denise Brissot he did not have a clear recollection ; but when he met her again, in his schooldays, in the Luxembourg

Gardens, a very different feeling swayed his precocious heart. Fernand was essentially curious.

Man being innocently in search of love, it is curiosity that moves him, and it is a secret cause of all his actions.

This the exacting and imperious spring that sets him constantly enlarging the scale of his investigations until, for the matter of that, this scale goes beyond that of the earth, and extends into infinite space, till no eye can follow it.

Perhaps Fernand was not altogether to blame for what was about to happen. From the outset his mother had been too absorbed in her pleasures and ironclads of fashion to do more than look at him now and then in the nursery. Nurses had, therefore, taken care of the tender body. Next had come the governess, the tutor, the school, and the college; in other words, strangers to whom was confided his mind.

How can you expect a child to see a clear highway when all is contradiction and antagonism? How can his reason settle down and his conscience steady itself? So much for the soul; and all this evil comes because the man and his wife wish to enjoy all pleasures, exercise all rights, and have all the rewards of paternity and maternity, though they cast their charges and duties upon others as much as possible. Like most, when Fernand was eighteen he began to avoid his

comrades and beat the bush in quest of that mysterious companion whom all such seek, while his parents either shut their eyes or turned them aside not to see anything, out of acquiescence with that stupid rule, "Youth must have its fling." But very murderous missiles are what youth too often flings.

CHAPTER IV.

THE EVE OF THE DUEL

ABOUT the period when the Count de Bardannes was struck with admiration at the sight of Denise Brissot, Fernand's passion for her passed its culminating point and began to move on the decline. Young as he was, the heir of the Thauzettes had begun to be very confident in himself in his little way. Nearly everything had succeeded with him. Like most men of the superior classes, he waived his prejudices when his interest was not affected.

In a political discussion, for example, he would willingly recognise the rights of the middle classes, and perhaps that the plebs had some claim on consideration ; and yet there was scarcely any pressure that could have forced him into a mesalliance with a girl of no family, always provided that she was not uncommonly rich. In thinking the matter over to himself, he would grant that Denise was an ornament on anybody's arm, peer's

or patrician's ; but he could not " stand " the Brissots. Madame Brissot was too much of a housewife for him. His mother was his ideal of womanhood, or, better to say, ladyhood.

He deigned once or twice to walk about with Brissot, but soon dropped him, among his congeners ; he mocked at the poor but honest household ; he railed at the threadbare elbows of the ex-captain's coat ; he made their toil, their profession, their very tears a reproach to them. " Old Brissot," he would say, " is quite a fool. Before my father died, before that financial smash of his that made a noise still ringing on the Bourse, he was kind enough to offer him a snug berth in a company, but the old donkey threw it up ! he's full of prejudices, that's what is the matter with him. My father and mother were quite right : to marry me into such a family would have been wasting a fine fellow."

Nevertheless, he felt it impossible to keep from seeing Denise. While he no longer called at her father's house, he contrived to throw himself in her way as she went out to give lessons. In fact, they met almost daily. The consequence was that when Fernand spent the day previous to the night of his encounter at cards with De Loria in practising the tricks of the trade, she saw nothing of him, to her great surprise.

That night whilst he, always sober, was plying his victim with drink, and robbing him quite as thoroughly

but with more time given to the operation, as if he held a pistol to him on the highway, Denise was scarcely able to sleep with asking herself why her lover had for the first time broken an appointment. She was afraid he must be ill; her vivid imagination pictured him beckoning her, and, as if the invisible wire of some magical telephone had been laid down between them, she seemed to hear his frantic and reproachful cries for her to hasten to his aid before too late.

At last (late in the morning, about the moment when poor De Loriac tumbled out of his chair, knocking the decanter of brandy, already emptied, with his head upon the floor, to be his pillow, and Fernand rose exultantly with all the spoil in his grasp), Denise sobbed herself to sleep.

But in her dreams she beheld her lover less tender than ever before.

He came, coldly inattentive, and spoke in an embarrassed way of the necessity of their not seeing one another so often, perhaps not seeing one another at all. She began to weep despairingly. He actually pushed her from him, and his head was turned aside when she looked up. Then she fancied, proud though she was in every day life, that she flung herself at his feet, imploring his mercy, but he remained unaffected save for a faint smile of scorn which flitted on his lips. She sprung to her feet, still loving him too much to be

angry, and intended to throw herself upon his bosom, and cling to him so that he should not depart until there was no doubt that he loved her no more. But his form was already vanishing, and she embraced the damp intangible air. With a frantic scream, she awoke. It was a dream that left her for three days in despair. No letter informed her why Fernand should show this neglect.

It was her father who relieved her of her anxiety, but filled her with a new terror with the same breath.

Fernand had won one hundred thousand francs, calling it a round sum, from De Loriac. When the latter recovered, not from the loss, but from his inebriety, he complained to everybody at their club and elsewhere of how the affair had happened. It was admitted that De Loriac was no genius at piquet, and consequently ought not to have played it at all, and that he was the greater fool to do such a thing without any witness but the decanter of cognac. The remonstrances swelled into such a loud chorus, that Fernand had to notice it. He did not exactly offer his revenge to De Loriac, but he *promised* him the chance ; but one way or another he avoided this usual penalty of the victor. The winning gambler's motto is : What is worth winning is worth keeping.

De Loriac submitted like a lamb ; but a friend of his, one M. de Fulvières, took up the quarrel. Somebody,

apropos of having met Fernand on the Boulevard with a *belle petite* in the fashion, envied his "winning ways."

"Especially at cards," commented M. de Fulvières in a very audible voice, though M. de Thauzette was almost at his elbow.

A challenge was inevitable, and Brissot told his daughter that as Fulvières had rather a strong reputation as a swordsman, he was afraid, being a judge of crossings of cold steel, that the elder man would deprive the card-table of such a promising ornament for the future. The girl retired to her room with a pressure on her heart as if it were being squeezed in a constrictor's folds. After all she had wronged her lover. It was engagements in society that had kept him from her. To be sure she found him to blame for dabbling in games, but then that was a fashionable sport, and the handsome Fernand was nothing if not fashionable. The thought of his going out to battle at the dawn scattered the clouds from off her affection, and she passed some hours in terrible anxiety, wishful to be his shield against the sword stroke, and yet not seeing how she could save his life and leave his honour unimpaired. This night she could not sob herself into even a dreamful sleep. On the contrary, her eyes were dry and burning.

She long contemplated the starless heavens. Then she drew a shawl around her head and shoulders, and

went down into the little garden, walking up and down on the sward beside the gravel path that her restless footsteps might not be heard by her unconscious parents. At the far end rose a rockery, up which she climbed and stayed there, leaning both elbows on the parapet of that wall which she felt so inclined to overleap.

Under her eyes was the broad asphalted way between her and the Luxembourg Gardens, where she had spent so many happy hours with the sweetheart whose life now hung by a thread.

The policeman regularly passing her, and one or two nocturnal wanderers, did not even mark the pale tearless face, rigid as a statue's and almost as cold with the night dews. Suddenly she heard her name called. She thought it was her father's voice from the house. She started like a fawn at the whizz of an arrow, but at the repetition she joyfully recognised the tone, and "Fernand," she called with a frantic opening of her arms to the young man. He held up his own from the other side of the wall.

The public avenue, where the early workmen might be seen clattering along, was scarcely the place for this imitation of the balcony scene in "Romeo and Juliet." If, unlike the princess in the fairy tale, she did not uncoil her long hair as a kind of ladder, she still assisted Thauzette quite as energetically to scale the

wall. He leaped down beside her and pressed his lips on the cheeks that were now wet with suddenly flowing tears.

“ Dear Denise,” said he, “ is it an additional reproach to me that I have made you weep ? ”

She protested that she forgave him for any pain he had caused by leaving her. At that moment the legion of words intended to be spoken had dwindled down into a paltry few. He told her that he had sworn never more to gamble, just as he had, for her sake, learned to spurn the wine cup ; not that his resolution was of much value now, since he came to tell her that he feared he would not triumph that morning in the duel he was going to fight.

“ She knew that,” she murmured in a choking voice, and still more faintly besought him to leave her.

“ Yes,” said he, “ I must leave you, for the vital hour is so near. I must go and march towards my death. I must go and plunge into the precipice which I myself dug ; but still you are my faith, all that I care for in life. I could almost be a coward for your sake, I feel like proposing that we should fly where we would be hidden from the general eye which would regard me with disdain. But no ! I am sure that you, as the daughter of a soldier, would rather see me dead than dishonoured. I shall not die. I cannot die, shielded by your blessing ! No, I will not quit you unless I

have your loving kiss that will make me invulnerably strong."

He still embraced Denise. One of her trembling hands was in his, and his boiling blood drove away the chill of the evening. At this contact her cheek glowed. Still, with an effort, she tried to repulse the impassioned youth.

"Pity, Fernand! Oh, Fernand, pity!" She murmured in a voice scarcely intelligible.

Two hours afterwards the Count André de Bardannes, whom Fernand had chosen as his second, and who had accepted the charge with some reluctance, in shaking his hand, observed, "Your pulse beats too high, my boy. I think I had better offer as many little obstacles as I can in order to gain time for you to cool down."

"Never mind," said young De Thauzette, with a contented smile, "and never fear. I feel like a man who has drunk the first cup of a tun of surpassingly delicious wine, and who is filled with the conviction in every vein where the wondrous draught circulates that he shall live to swallow the last drop before he is sixty years old."

At the second pass, in spite of his confidence, Fernand was scratched across the wrist. The sight of the blood was more soothing than the count's words. He insisted upon continuing the combat with the left hand.

Both the seconds remonstrated, but as De Fulvières had his blood up too, and reckoned with so good a commencement that he would be the victor, he was of the same mind as his antagonist. At the next pass he had every reason to regret his unanimity with the foe, as the latter accommodated him with a very artistic lunge, which enabled his surgeon to run up a four months' bill.

CHAPTER V.

THE FATHERLESS BABE

DENISE had staked all her life on her fears for her lover. He emerged from the duel after almost killing an honourable gentleman without coming near the poor girl again. She abased her dignity so much as to write to him ; he did not once answer her : the infamous coward had totally abandoned her. It was soon clear that, dazzled and fascinated by Fernand, she may have loved him, but she loved him no more. Loss of hope, health, happiness and future, all lost, even to her honour, she could not believe that she would ever be tranquil again ; it was a terrible revolution for the proud young girl.

She fell into a deep despair ; neither sleeping nor eating ; thin and fading, she was forced to give up teaching, by which she had helped the family to live, as well as the vocal lessons on which she had based so many hopes. Her mother thought that she was

dying, and was all the more alarmed as, to Denise, the prospect of death was one she smiled upon. It was repose, and might be oblivion. Her mother was compelled to give up everything else in order to nurse her. In her delirium Denise let escape partial revelation amid ardent prayers.

She supplicated heaven to receive her ; to spare her from the shame of blushing throughout her life ; she said that she feared no doom because she was not alone guilty ; she became so pale and so wasted away that she resembled a Mignon, who, almost detached from earth, aspires only for the sky. In the end she was obliged to confide all to her poor mother, whose hair turned white in a few days. In spite of her grief, Madame Brissot was hale in mind and cool in temper, and forced herself to be calm over this sorrowful secret. She showed herself to be a good Christian after her own manner, saying, "Nothing arrives without heavenly consent. If this test has been imposed upon you, we must look upon it as penitence without murmuring. I will not be so cruel as to say that you ought to have defended yourself better. Enough that you must know that he will not marry you now, as he would not marry you before. Women know instinctively that things turn out this way, and yet we let ourselves be deceived. There are no excuses for us. But you must live ; you must live and think only for the little being who will

have no father ; to whom you will have to be doubly the parent."

This noble language made a deep impression upon the future mother. Understanding her duties, she resigned herself to them. The great trouble now was not to let Brissot know anything about it. Thinking everything of honour, he would certainly have killed his daughter.

Alone by herself, Denise could not have acted calmly enough ; but her mother, who answered for everything and prepared everything, was a shield behind which she gained confidence. If Denise found the courage, her mother found the strength to spare Brissot from a heart-breaking sorrow. Fortunately, he was kept out all day as cashier in a business house from eight in the morning till seven in the evening. Thanks only to his pittance, the three did not die of hunger.

The women talked over the doctor who looked in, and he told the ex-captain that Denise had nervous fever ; she would come round all right enough if she was left unworried in isolation.

Meanwhile, Madame Brissot had been cautiously making enquiries. She had already written to an old friend in the South of France, who was pretty well off ; she did not mind coming to Paris as if she had dropped in upon them without warning ; it was the easiest thing in the world for her to make it clear to Brissot

that the best return for their hospitality was for her to receive Madame Brissot and their daughter down at her place.

It was high time.

Denise had arrived at that state of moral prostration when the body feels no pain. Had the fever that devoured her and robbed her of half her strength weakened her faculties a little more, Brissot must have perceived that she was slowly dying of some hidden suffering of which she dared not complain.

In that remote refuge, amongst strangers, in a little rustic house, on a winter's night, the first cry of the child of Fernand and Denise was heard. Its grandmother was weeping bitterly, for in ideas she was carried back to her husband in town. The last letter from him hoping that the girl would return with renewed health, she thought it impossible for him to suspect one that he adored, and to whom none but examples of honour, energy, probity and uprightness had been shown.

Alas ! they were only on the threshold of the miseries that awaited them.

When Denise was able to get about again she seemed to be inspired far less with love for her child than with burning indignation for the wretch who had abandoned her. It was natural that she should love the innocent creature who had done no evil, and that it should be

pitied and protected. But where was that man who should have sustained and consoled her, who should have assisted them both to live ? He seemed to have stolen away like a thief. She felt she could never forgive him for having left her alone, struggling with shameful pain. Her mother already began to confer with her, in as matter-of-fact a tone as possible, upon the necessity of their returning home after putting out the child to nurse. During the night after this conference Denise had a dreadful dream : she thought herself getting out of the train at Paris and being met there by Fernand ; he greeted her with a livid smile which showed that just as *her* love had turned to scorn, *his* had become hate. Poor girl ! she thought that he would denounce her, slander her, and doubly ruin her ; at all events, her fame and the purity of her life, her last and only treasure, were at the mercy of that scoundrel. He became the person that she had the most right to fear and fly from. They were enemies, and neither could pardon the other.

Dishonoured, stigmatized, shunned by the world : if the truth was publicly bruited, Denise would be loaded with the curses of her father.

Heaven alone knew the purity of her conscience, while no earthly being would believe even in her repentance. It was thus she condemned herself.

Without awakening, although she no longer dreamed,

she rose in a mighty resolution dictated to her by despair. Clasping her child to her breast, she slipped out of the house with the firm step of the sleep-walker, hastening to her destiny.

There was a little brook, often enlarged into a torrent by the storms, that skirted the village in the southward. It was thither that she directed herself. On the bank, however, she hesitated an instant. Though outwardly calm, she must have been violently agitated in her mind, for incoherent words dropped brokenly from her trembling lips. And thus, while the baby slept peacefully, she walked up and down for some time, almost like a sentinel.

The morning light appeared with pale orange streaks and slightly gilded her dishevelled hair.

In her simple robe glistening with dew, she looked like one of those nymphs come up from the waters to beguile man into destruction.

It was thus she appeared to a solitary and unromantic man who was also out at this untimely hour.

Contrary to her, he was awake, very "wide awake" indeed, in all senses of the word.

His name was Thouvenin: he was staying at an inn at a larger village farther down the stream. He was a hard-working and ingenious inventor, whose object and work was to rise in the social scale and obtain a fortune to make his mother's last days sunny.

and the earlier years happy of a woman with whom he had fallen in love. Working in Lyons in the factories, an idea had struck him of inventing a piece of machinery to be worked almost purely automatically by water power. For fear his idea should be pirated before he earned sufficient money to pay for the patents, he picked out this secluded part of the country for experiments with his model.

Not far from where Denise had walked in her somnambulism, but on the opposite shore, he had set up his little mill the night before. Meanwhile the waters had risen, and had not only forced the model free from its ties, but dashed it in a confused mass against a clump of elders. Between the islet where the wreck was grounded and the bank where he ruefully stood, the water rolled deeply in a fresh channel covered with scattered leaves.

Though Thouvenin was not imaginative, at his first glance upon the pale statuesque figure beyond she struck him as being some odious spirit which had visited him with this bad luck for having profaned her aqueous realm with his prosaic brass and iron wheel-work. The strange aspect caused him to forget his personal loss and keep his eyes upon her.

Like an automaton, she had plucked off the shawl wound round her baby, and tore it into little shreds that she cast on the water. Mechanically turning her

head in the direction they took, she watched them sink or swim, and be hurried on until they had disappeared, and yet her stony eyes had not really in the least perceived them. Suddenly she lifted heavenward a gaze full of despair, mute entreaty, and intense desolation, and bent over the water's edge. Just at her feet spun an eddy made by an old tree partly submerged by the side of the bank: Even to her spell-bound senses the precipice had a temptation, the gulf sent up silent voices which charmed her and promised the peace that she could never expect on earth. Whatever singular distortion of her senses was taking place, the guiding power was not to be withstood.

Just before the morning mist rolled away a cloud passed over the eastern sky; a shadow fell particularly upon the little river; but Thouvenin saw clearly enough that the young woman and the child were drawn over the rotten edge into the whirlpool. Instinctively he shouted for help, although there was none else near that lonely spot. Meanwhile he did not wait for help to come; even whilst he was shuddering with horror he dashed down his hat, tore off his coat, and, with great intelligence, running up the stream to have the full benefit of the current, leaped out and dived in to the rescue.

Luckily, while at Lyons, he had become an excellent swimmer in the beautiful Rhone. It needed a man

very sure of himself to jump into this treacherous stream. However, after being caught in one or two eddies and crossing them, he reached that whirl where the girl with her living burden was cast up to the surface.

Awakened by the shock and the coldness, Denise joined her cries to the infant's. Afraid of being entangled, when all three lives might be lost, Thouvenin, who had all his wits about him, swam towards a bough of the old tree projecting stiffly, and wound his left arm round it. Then, leaning out as far as he could, he grasped the girl as she was almost swept by, and drew her in towards him. All depended upon the dead bough having preserved enough elasticity. Happily, it held firm. Very slowly Thouvenin commenced to work his way towards the bank. He was not very confident as to the result, for the woman, who had become insensible, gave him no assistance, the less as she used both arms to embrace her infant, and had become heavier and heavier, like an image of lead. He feared that, after all, he had only fished up a dead body.

The sun burst through the cloud and shone full upon the white face, and the sight sent a shiver through him. He pressed his pace and managed, without well knowing how, to scramble up the bank and drag the woman after him. As soon as he stood upon firm land he hastened to wring out his own clothes so that he could move

more freely. When he again donned them still there was nobody in sight, and he had little breath to expend in random appeals. His eyes fell without hope upon the woman whom he had so miraculously snatched from the water, but not perhaps from death.

However, a man working among machinery requires practical lessons in surgery, and he set to trying to revive her. He lifted her head upon his knee, chafed her temples, and discovered that her heart had not ceased to beat. As for the child, it was crying lustily, so as to prove that its lungs had not absorbed one drop of inoisture.

Yes, they both lived, but in order to quite save them they required attention to be promptly given. At no great distance he spied smoke rising sluggishly from a little cabin half dug in the ground and half covered with boughs in such a manner that, without the vapour to betray it, he would never have suspected a human habitation there. He wrung out his waistcoat, and with a strip of her dress made a kind of sling in which he placed the child to hang upon his back and not encumber him. As for Denise, she was only a great child to a strong youngish fellow like him, and he took her in his arms and started off sturdily towards the cottage. Before he got half the way he began to totter though ; a little farther and he stumbled ; but there he set up a shout, and at the third call a sleepy voice responded.

A man was digging in the potato patch on the other side of the cabin, and he came round to be more astonished than ever in his life before by seeing a half-clothed man streaming with wet, carrying what seemed to be a dead woman in his arms, while the round face of an infant, red and blue with cold, peeped over his shoulder. The cottager was very poor and his bed was only leaves, which he had left so lately that it was quite warm. Besides, the fire may be low, but it never goes out in the country, where wood is to be had for the picking up. The inevitable pannikin was simmering, and there could not have been anything better, for Thouvenin began to feel chilly. He threw the cottager's coat upon his shoulders, and without paying any more attention to himself, turned to help him resuscitate the poor young mother. They had covered her with everything in the way of garments that Jacques Bouhoom's scanty wardrobe afforded. The eyes were half open, but little lustre glowed within; the lips had grown dry.

For full a minute Thouvenin thought that he had gone through all his travail for no good result. The cottager had thrown an armful of dry straw, leaves, and dry wood upon the fire, so that in a very few moments a blaze illuminated the place and heated all its close air. Thouvenin thought that the features of the patient began to contract; he fell on his knees

watching anxiously. Without doubt the lips did move and the pearly teeth began to grind.

“Bravo!” said he, “my friend, we shall save her yet. I don’t want to make a brag of it, but if this smashing of my poor model of a mill is a token that I was on the wrong track, I shall turn to and study medicine and pick up some sort of a living at that! look, look, I am sure now that we have saved her.”

By the time that her name was ascertained, and her mother and hostess were summoned, Denise was well on the way to recovery; Thouvenin received her thanks, nearly entirely on behalf of the child as if she did not think he was giving her much of a boon in restoring her life.

Before she had entirely recovered their old friend took the child on to Paris without them. It would never have done for the Brissots to be seen with it on their journey.

In some cases a mother is prohibited from being seen beside her infant; it is a crime in the unmarried to love and become trustfully a mother.

The baby was left with a nurse a little way from the capital, where, at long intervals, Madame Brissot, and still less often, Denise ventured to have a peep at it. Her mother would hide her snowy hair under a black wig. Denise would wear a red front and a canary-

coloured chignon in order to look like a "fast girl"; that is to say, the very opposite of herself.

When the child was a year old it had grown up excellently, because they well feed the baby-farmer. With a smile he always welcomed Denise, and seemed to understand what was said to him. He was winsome enough to have made anybody love him, but the nurse carried on a trade and showed no particular fondness; in fact, her strongest emotion seemed to be curiosity, for the more she knew about her patients, the more money she could extort.

All of a sudden Denise received word that the little one, who looked last time so hearty, was touched by death. They hastened to the place, but only had time to catch its dying look. They kissed it with similar grief and love; dressed it up beautifully in white clothes, laid it in its own little crib, smothered with roses, with its doll next its cheek and all its other playthings in its arms. They were the only mourners that followed it to its tiny grave. It went on sleeping—for its life, after all, had only been a sleep—in the graveyard of Colombes. As long as they lived in town they used to pay secret visits so as to keep the grave green. At length Captain Brissot, through the recommendation of Madame de Thauzette, received an appointment in the country. It was as bailiff to the Count de Bar-dannes. He pleased him so much during his probation,

that the young noble signed a long engagement. Moreover, as he was lonely in his country house, he gladly yielded to Brissot's humble suggestion that he would like to fill up the vacancy of housekeeper with his wife. As Denise accompanied her mother, they could no longer attend to the baby's grave, but the old grave-digger promised to take care of it ; he was not only a good-hearted fellow, but he liked flowers, and they were sure that they would cluster over the stone where there was no name carved but that of the poor girl's father "Jean." Fernand might have walked upon it and not guessed that his unacknowledged offspring slumbered there.

CHAPTER VI.

A FRENCH COUNTRY-HOUSE IN OUR DAY

AFTER squandering rather than merely spending his youth in town, Count André de Bardanues withdrew into his shell, as they said who were whilom his participants in revelry, and who now pounced upon the next comer with a fortune. It was necessary to nurse his dilapidated property. He lived for a time very much like that unhappy "intermediate heir" with whom all country solicitors are familiar; he who suffers for his father's wilful waste and, dwelling like an anchorite himself, trains up his son to be a Colbert or Gladstone in economical finance in order that the fourth generation shall have millions to fling away again. So the recurrence is repeated, and racing men and unfaithful stewards thrive. Unskilled in book-keeping, too easy with the old farmers and tenants, the count would have been overwhelmed by the swelling

sea of mortgages. But intervention came from an unexpected hand.

The young widow of his old mentor, De Thauzette, recommended our acquaintance Brissot as his bailiff, as we know.

A few days after his acceptance of the offer the applicant presented himself. The old cavalry captain, risen from the ranks, was decorated with the Algerian, Crimcan, and Siege of Paris medals. In the army he had helped the commissariat with the books and been a very sleuth hound in tracing out the artifices of the forage contractors. He pleased the count at first sight with his frank, honest, determined bearing. He set to propping up his undermined fortunes with a vigour which no delinquent tenants could withstand.

Nor was this all the good luck due more or less directly to Madame de Thauzette. Ex-captain Jean Brissot had a wife. To tell the truth, she was the cause of his quitting the service, for he was too valuable to have let his inevitable promotion be long deferred in favour of aristocratic rivals from St. Cyr and Saumur. But the War Office regulations are Rhadamanthine. Unless an officer can show proof of his having a fortune, he is not allowed to marry. Think of the hold a foreign secret agent would have over the poor devil linked to an insatiable, fashionable, beautiful and youthful woman! Thus are plans sold in duplicate, the

mitrailleuse betrayed before its employment in action, the very mischief played with the honour of a country.

Brissot gave up the epaulets, and contented himself with the love of the woman to whom he sacrificed no more than her sterling worth justified. When their daughter Denise was of the age to help the struggling family materially by giving those lessons for which her natural intelligence made her education richly available things looked up. The old soldier, who had beaten his sword into a pen, faced a grim future less gloomily. Unfortunately, the girl fell ill, from over exertion he always imagined, and not merely were her services lacking, but her mother had to quit other cares and nurse her back from the gaping grave. The poor veteran had to endure the drudgery of a humble clerkship, for he could not compete for the more lucrative berths filled with Germans. They called themselves "Austrians" in order to avoid the unpleasant heritage of the war; but though employers must have seen through the mask, shorthand, all the Continental tongues, and all the cardinal business virtues at one hundred francs a week outweighed patriotic considerations. Poor Brissot toiled on from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., and even then they only just escaped dying of hunger.

He was very glad of his new and wholesome situation,

therefore. The country air and the plentiful nourishment set him up again stout, solid, erect, and gave him a rich colour.

Bardannes no sooner learnt that this excellent servitor had a family than he insisted on their being telegraphed for, and mother and daughter came post haste.

Mother Brissot brought order and spread welfare throughout the château. As for Denise, though reserved, staid, austere and unsmiling, all the parish were the happier for her coming.

The count was not merely relieved of worry, but inspired with a contented feeling totally novel.

The open-air life he led seemed to have renewed the candour and illusions of early manhood. Still, when he perceived Mdlle. Brissot's spell growing upon him, he tried to get away from it by a rush up to the city and by reviving the gay and noisy doings of the wild oats season. He came back downright vexed with himself. The image of that charming girl never ceased to haunt him, and so solid was the vision, so bright and beauteous, that the real women seemed phantoms!

There was no doubt that he had fallen into the habit of taking her presence as a regular atmosphere. He fancied she looked a little dull when he started, and cheered up when he got back. So he gave up the runs to town, and settled down to enjoy quite a domesticated life with the Brissots. After dinner, they all used to

pass the time together. Denise singing to the playing of his young sister Martha, whom he withdrew from the convent school, and André dreaming the hours away until they put his bedroom candle into his hand where the cigar had gone out forgotten. Feeling that love for the girl grow, the count used to swear a little at being such a double-distilled ass as to walk into his still, cold room all alone !

One charming early summer Sunday morning, when the fresh breeze blew away all his thoughts of sleeping time except that of affection for Denise, the young noble was walking in the ample grounds of his redeemed estate. From the brick-kilns at a distance the fumes slowly arose, interspersed with little puffs of white-like snow flakes from cracks in the fresh stacks. The chickens were following the cultivator weeding, the crows were hovering over the beetles that blundered up and down with the sulky fretfulness of a man with an appointment who has lost his way. There was a ring of adzes and hammers from the row of new dwelling-houses he was adding to the village of Barlannesville bidding fair to become a town in his lifetime.

When he came back to the house he spied some neighbours upon the verandah under a huge catalpa-tree. Among this platoon of the notables of the district, all listening at the large French windows to the singing of Denise to the piano accompaniment of

Mdlle. de Bardannes within the reception room, was the queen of the gossips.

Madame Pontferrand was surnamed "The Weasel" on account of her foraging spirit. She employed her piety itself as a card of introduction to be at all the sickbeds, and deathbeds too ; and even at the funeral parties she pulled the reputation of the departed one to tatters before the bakemeats were cold. She was haughty enough and proud of the family into which she was married, and yet would converse with a footman rather than let her tongue have [repose. She would have been an invaluable agent to the police, but she had not the genius of money-making, and spied for her own gratification. Her friends called her, also, the *Gazette* of Bardannesville, and recommended her to new comers as a perambulating news-box, as well for the truths she uttered as the perfidious blanks in her stories which transformed the most simple and innocent acts, into guilty actions.

At her side was her daughter by her husband's former wife, a tall and slender, rather sharp and pretty girl. In spite of her new mamma's own reserve as to trimmings and height of feathers in hat, Clarisse Pontferrand, aided and abetted by her father, would follow the fashions as nearly as the provinces keep to the Paris vogue.

On this occasion André could not but admire the

girl a little, in her green plush costume, with blood-hued velvet, Fedora front and cuffs, relieved by black cord, and black velvet shoulder knots. On her dark hair was tilted a large hat with a profusion of plumes, at an angle which the elders of Bardannesville solemnly condemned, but which the youngsters vowed to imitate the next Sunday. As for her mother, she wore a black and brown brocade, and a hat with a front like a Swiss chalet's gable ; a cluster of Edelweiss emphasized this creation of the local milliner.

When the piano and song concluded the piece, this mob of cognoscenti made an irruption into the house. They cried bravo ! and encore ! with considerable clamour, but did not clap their hands ; gloves are costly at Bardannesville, and to split them in applause is not an everyday tribute to the vocalism of a governess.

The latter had risen at the unfolding of the window-door. With a flushed face, she hastened to protest at their unkindness in listening surreptitiously.

André followed the invading column into the room.

It was the ancient hall of the building, modernised and made both elegant in the French sense and comfortable in the English. The walls were wainscoted very high with thick oak, sculptured liberally, and adorned with the " B " of the family. The same letter glowed in old gold on the piano cover of blue and red, fringed with " azure and or." The same colours were

repeated in the upholstery of the lounges, sofas, centre-seats, and table-covers. Resinous wood burnt pleasantly, for the hall was so lofty and open to the gardens and the north-east, in an enormous fireplace of Louis XIV.'s time ; over the marble mantel from an Italian quarry a family portrait of a maid of honour to Anne of Austria defied the smoke and dust with its brilliant flesh tints and splendid varnish. A kind of table-bureau, made to order, as the "B" again revealed, took up a good deal of room, and recalled the levee held when the tenants and farmers came to pay their dues. The pictures and engravings were few, but by masters, and the subjects local or hunting and sporting scenes ; there was even a Bardannes in an irreproachable fox-hunting suit, and a Bardannes and his wife in Canadian snow shoes, which proved they travelled.

While Denise remonstrated at being taken by surprise and her accompanist rose blushing, as became a girl in her teens, fresh from convent school, Madame Pontferrand whispered to her better half : "She knew we were by all the time!"

"Do you really think so, dear?" inquired he in a dreamy sort of way, for he was only startled when, by a slip of the tongue, his wife made an observation not malicious.

Pontferrand was a gay, sly old fellow, with a wig rather too demonstrative, and sandy whiskers rather too

modest, a smooth face with a merry mouth and liquorish eye ; in his velveteen coat he wore a rose of no pretension to the high-sounding names in costly gardeners' lexicons, and his waistcoat was a pattern of hunting horns, yellow on blue, which dimmed the gold of a chain representing a string of fish, tail to head, with a hook to the watch, and the button hole bar the portion of a fishing rod ; this seemed to promise a disciple of Walton and St. Hubert. But nothing of the kind. Pontferrand never wasted his hours at the rod, gun, or kennels. Madame said these were not pious pursuits.

Clarisse went over to the piano, and examined the music on the rest. It was the air in "Mireille," "And if by chance some fine young fellow."

She shook her head.

"What," cried Denise, "have you never heard that opera?"

"Where should I hear operas?"

"At the opera," was the logical response.

"They never take me to the play," sighed she.

"Not even to the Opera?" queried the lady-companion of Mdlle. de Bardannes, lifting her brows a little astounded.

"No," answered Mdlle. de Pontferrand more ruefully —"they tell me that nobody but married people go to the opera?"

"That's so, generally," broke in a man at their elbow, "but it is not compulsory."

"Ah, M. Thouvenin, what a funny man you are!"

But the young lady must have been very superficial in her judgment of men to style M. Thouvenin "funny." He was almost the opposite.

Julius Thouvenin was now a rich man, though risen from the very ranks of the artisan. Intelligent, inventive, laborious, losing the surplus of his meagre earnings in "fiddling" about mechanics, he chanced to fall in with the Count of Bardannes not long after those experiments having turned out successfully that he renewed after the mishap which introduced him to *Denise*. There he had an advantage over the young lady, for she had neither noticed her rescuer before she took the suicidal plunge, nor seen him after the few agitated moments when he received her hurried thanks.

It is needless to say that the artisan had a soul of honour, and not by a look or far less a word would he have reminded her of the debt she owed ; perhaps, he divined, she owed him even more now by preserving the veil over that mournful episode of tragedy in her early life.

To return to the count, he furnished Thouvenin with the funds to make his models and get out his first patents without knowing much about him. It looked for a while as if the count might as well have

thrown the cash away on race horses, yachts, wine and cards.

But Thouvenin had a double debt to pay, to return the advance and justify his ideas. His success came, and his revenues augmented as they will when a man has a monopoly in "short cuts" in this time-saving age. He believed that without the count's intervention he must have filled a pauper's grave, and his inventions have been carted away to the melting pot as rusty gimeracks. As a small return, he gave his benefactor wrinkles about agricultural implements and how to utilize his lands. He kindled a liking for labour in the useless "swell," as well as a liking for the real things in life—truth and honour, and both were the gainers from the good deed. It was twice blessed.

Thouvenin listened good humouredly to the young girl's chat. Clarisse had turned to the host, and asked if there were always such agreeable songs arising in his house ? With a happy face, he answered with his hope it was so.

"Yes, you are happy here," exclaimed Mdlle. de Pontferrand, looking round.

"You might lend me that piece of music, dear ?" she proceeded to Denise, as she returned to the Erard, and sat down to finger out the air.

"You must ask mamma," replied Mdlle. Brissot, knowingly, with a glance over at Clarisse's new mother.

The latter was relating the history of the latest addition to the village society, with manifold original episodes and her peculiar suppressions of exculpatory facts ; Pontferrand was blandly smiling as Madame Brissot, a worthy old lady in silver-grey hair, and with a confirmedly sad resigned air, recounted the precocity of her daughter in music. Thouvenin was cutting the *Journal des Demoiselles* for Mdlle. Bardannes whilst she brushed a stain of crushed roses off her white frock. Clarisse was reassured.

"I shall take it first," she said in a low tone, "and not tell her till I have learnt it by heart ! My own mamma is not to blame for my ignorance of the opera—she would have taken me. My mamma was very fond of it, but this mamma is the second wife of papa ; so she has to be very severe in order to show that she understands her re-spon-si-bi-li-ties. What on earth does that mean ?"

Denise did not offer to define it, and the girl rattled on whilst turning over the music on the piano top and in the rack. "Is there anything else pretty here ? Oh, your photograph ! then, there was something else pretty there, very pretty ! Dear, would not a young man give a great deal to have got off that compliment, eh ?"

The other's face darkened ; but almost on the second the placid smile beamed again.

"How does this go? I am afraid it is too high for me."

Denise glanced at the lines and sang them off easily.

The count looked up. He was leaning in almost the respectful attitude of a son on the back of Madame Brissot's chair.

"The voice of Mdlle. Brissot is coming back daily."

"I am glad to see it is," said her mother.

"So that young lady is your daughter?" queried Madame Pontferrand, her voice shrilling in upon a cadenza of the mellow and winning one with annoying sharpness.

The other nodded proudly.

"I really must compliment you. I have heard her spoken of. Did she not propose singing a little while ago in the church at a wedding?"

"Yes, Madame, Farmer Bertrand's."

"She offered to play the accompaniment on the organ the count gave the church?"

"Yes, Madame," interposed that gentleman, catching his name.

"But," went on the good-hearted soul, exultantly, "that required the Bishop's consent; which would not be given, of course. The Bishop, very properly, does not like women singing in churches; it distracts the eye, and I quite agree with him. To be sure, there is sometimes poor singing, but people ought not to go to church only to listen to fine music."

"Certainly not," cut in Thouvenin, with the incisive irony of a keen observer, "they ought to go there to learn to be charitable, eh?"

Madame Pontferrand felt that the laugh was against her, though she did not in her narrowness perceive the hit, and hastened to conceal her discomfiture by pursuing the former train of thought.

"Your daughter," she continued to Madame Brissot, "must have studied a great deal to sing as well as that?"

"Indeed, she has studied hard, Madame, under the direction of an old friend of ours, a vocal professor. He wanted her to go on the stage. He assured us that she might earn 100,000 francs a year."

"I do not at all like the idea of going on those horrid boards," observed the devout dame, shaking her head reproachfully.

Again the inventor came to the rescue.

"The boards of the stage, Madame, are covered with costly carpets now-a-days," he said.

"They do not put the carpets down for dancers, I believe, though!" with an air of triumph, which even her husband resented in pity for her ignorance.

"But Mdlle. Brissot would not think of dancing, dear!" said he, waking up.

"As long as a woman parades in public and for

money, whether she sings or dances, it comes to the same thing, love!" retorted the amiable creature.

"Allow me, Madame," said Thouvenin; "there is some difference: dancing is preferred by deaf people and those with broad views; singing by those with narrow ditto."

"For shame!" ejaculated Madame Pontferrand, to the surprise of all the circle.

"And why, my dear?" queried her husband, more startled than the others.

"Why? Do you ask me why? Did not the gentleman speak of narrow dittos? And when you order a suit of clothes, have I not seen the bill: coat, so much, and dittos? To allude to trousers in my presence! he's no gentleman! In fact, my lord," she went on to the amused count as Thouvenin went over to the piano, "Who and what is the gentleman?"

CHAPTER VII.

PONTFERRAND'S LITTLE DISTRACTION

"M. THOUVENIN is a large manufacturer," said André, "and extensive land proprietor. He has a great fortune and, better than all, a great heart."

"A great fortune?" echoed the scandal-monger eagerly, and, with sudden respect, she went on to ask his full name.

"You need not cudgel your brains, Madame Pontferrand," said her husband, sinking down in the cushion of the lounge, and longing for a cigar instead of the balderdash of the ladies; "Thouvenin will not be found in the *Almanac de Gotha*; but you will find it in the Business Directories though, my dear!"

"Oh! our new rulers, eh, love!" sneered the lady; but she eyed the rich manufacturer warily. "Is he any relation to your lordship's sister's governess?"

"No, Madame, and Mdlle. Brissot is not my sister's

governess," the noble hastened to say, "she is principally a companion ; I may say, a friend."

"A friend ? a hireling friend ! for I daresay you do pay her, and much too liberally for the little she does. Ah ! if it were not for the liberality of you of the extreme upper class, the arts and graces would not be so expensive to us of the next degree."

Madame Pontferrand the Second was of rather a dubious stock, but she had always asserted a superiority to the family she joined, itself undeniably an old strain. In fact, if the strain was kept up much longer, it would snap the line, Pontferrand would jokingly declare.

"Mlle. Brissot receives no money under this roof," remarked the count loftily. "She is the daughter of my bailiff, the most honest man in the world, an old soldier, who deserves the war medals he wears."

"Did the present Government award them ?"

"No, the one before."

"Ah, that amounts to about the same thing," observed Madame Pontferrand, who, as a Legitimist, ignored the Second Empire as the loyal historian does "the Cromwell interval," and began her forward date from Louis Philippe at the nearest.

"At all events, Madame, he was a good soldier. He was wounded in the Crimea and in Italy, and for that received the medals. They—the medals, not the

wounds—are a great infliction; but how can he help himself?"

"If he was so brave, what did he leave the army for?" asked the lady with beautiful feminine logic.

"To marry!" was the simple answer.

In fact, as the army regulations forbid the union of a penniless officer, the resignation of Brissot when a captain, for the sake of his wife, was a strong proof of his undeniable affection.

"Love for that old woman?" murmured the gossip, glancing at the housekeeper, whose patience and amiability were manifest to the purblind themselves; "how queer! Don't you think it is queer when you look at an old woman to hear it said that she once was loved?"

"No," answered the count, too tenderly impressed to rebuke the prude sharply. "When a woman is still as good as that one, and was as pretty, it is clear enough. What really is extraordinary is that any man can love or marry a woman who has always been uncomely and who has never been good!"

Madame Pontferrand did not remark the glance which accompanied his stinging words and was levelled at her husband; but, feeling somehow piqued, replied, with a toss of the head:

"There are different sorts of goodness, thank goodness! Some all women do not care about having. In short, these are——"

"Good folk who have met with misfortunes. Supported most worthily and valiantly!"

"And how did they live through misfortune?"

"By toil," said De Bardannes simply.

"Handiwork!" cried the devotee, with a wry face. Poor things!—Did the fine lady-like daughter go to work too?"

"The daughter gave lessons to other young ladies, for she is extremely well educated. She has all the diplomas."

"Profane education, fie!" sneered his dialoguist, shrugging her shoulders as if she sought to crush an earwig out of the catalpa between the bony blades.

The noble went on to explain, with a minutia which astounded Thouvenin, how he had been rewarded for taking the Brissots into his house—the man to govern his estate, the woman to govern the house, and the daughter to look after his sister whom her presence had enabled him to bring home out of the nunnery school. His hearer shook her head disapprovingly.

"That is trust and no mistake! The idea of thinking that a person who meant to go on the stage could be a proper and a safe companion for a girl of a good family—for your sister is of a good family!"

"As good as mine, of course!" rejoined the count, unable to repress a smile at the naïveté.

"I see, it is one of your new ideas! new ideas have

cost our country dearly ! ” and as André gladly turned away she hissed after him, “ Some of these days I shall ask you what comes of your new ideas ! Well, Philibert,” she went on, without a break even to take breath, giving her dozing mate a jog, “ what are you mooning about—new ideas ? ”

“ Of you, my dear ! not a new idea ! ha, ha ! In fact,” he went on, dryly, “ it is difficult to think of anything else when you are by ! ”

Thouvenin laughed ; he rather liked this artful old dog, who was as jolly as possible over his bad bargain. The count had gone to speak with his sister, who was not very gushing towards him after having paid the local scandal tax imposed by Madame Pontferrand, for out of the uncommunicative she took her revenge by saying heaven knows what of them ! Thouvenin approached Pontferrand and sat down beside him.

As the wife rather feared the inventor, cool, reserved, observant, and guarded, she sniffed a little, but concluded to withdraw from her lawful partner whilst he was thus bucklered. She looked around like the combatant in a treble duel who, having despatched his opponent, has the right to fall on one of the enemy similarly disengaged; nobody but Mdlle. de Bardannes caught her eyes.

Marthe de Bardannes was a charming child of sixteen ; tall, straight, slender, with a naturally candid

look imperilled by the fineness of a developing wit, she moved about with a graceful undulation which people called aristocratic—when they knew her rank! But such grace is feminine and of no class. In complete repose her features were classically regular, but, heaven be thanked, the thousand caprices of a maiden's mind kept them in agitation. Often the eyelashes lifted themselves out of the downcast direction prescribed at the religious colleges, the mouth parted to show fine sharp teeth, and the limpid blue eyes, till quite recently at least, danced with merriment sooner than sit in the rigidity of sorrowing for the sins of the world. It was clear that all the mystical fascination religion has for some novices exercised but a shallow power over this little lady.

"How well you play, dear child!" cried Madame Pontferrand, who always overdid the cordial and familiar tone in addressing her sisters of the upper ranks, as she would describe them. "Ah, Clarisse will never attain that perfection! The good sisters, strange to say, are as noted for inculcating the piano as piety! By the way," she pursued, following the drop of honey with a gallon of wormwood, "you were not at church this morning?"

"I—I started to go, but the gatekeeper's wife at the lodge called me in to see her little boys down with illness——"

"Nothing catching!" exclaimed the good dame, springing back with alacrity and suddenly dividing, as if her dress improver were a wedge, the count and Denise, who were insensibly attracted nearer one another.

"Not at all; do not be alarmed, madame."

"Your not being in your family pew, which ours so nearly touches, ahem! that precipitated our looking in here; for, of course, we know even in this rural place that it is a little too early for the dinner to which we have the honour of an invitation."

Martha smiled humorously towards her brother, and, to the horror of the inquirer and her clique, and the delight of Thouvenin and Pontferrand, made this staggering response.

"To tell you the truth, madame, I was not vexed at the diversion, for I have so much church service in the convent that I am taking a rest now! I have a lot of back stock to work off, as Mons. Thouvenin would say. You see, my dear madame, *you* only go to church on Sunday; in the nunnery I had to go every day!"

"Of course, it is this freethinking Mdlle. Brissot who told you this about me?" stammered Madame Pontferrand.

"No, Madame; Mdlle. Brissot was there this morning."

"She was sitting beside Madame de Thauzette, I

believe," observed Pontferrand, looking up, and nudging Thouvenin to be attentive.

His wife started. This Parisian was so much her opposite, being showy, grace itself, kindly, captivating, and, above all, dressed in the pink of fashion, whilst she never rose out of the drab of respectability, that the prospect of this comet in the parish was agonizing.

"Is she down here?" she gasped.

Indeed, she was in the count's house with her son at that very moment.

"Let me see," muttered Pontferrand, thoughtfully polishing his knuckles with the palm of his other hand, "it's over ten years—yes, a good ten years—that she was a professional beauty, my love."

"What's that—a processional beauty and your love?" cried she quickly.

"No, no; I said my love to you. And not a processional beauty, but a professional beauty! A professional beauty is one whose face is her fortune and in society's salons, whilst a processional beauty is one who appears in the stage spectacles."

"I daresay your definition is very correct—in its meaning, my dear; but you might remember that your daughter is in your hearing, to say nothing of the count's sister. Now I thought that a professional beauty was one who made profession of being a belle. Put it down to my ignorance of such people!"

"Ah, but Madame de Thauzette," ran on Pontferrand lively, "was not mere profession—she had the foundation, the airs and graces, the physique, you know—"

"You men know nothing about such things! And I wonder you knew such a celebrity in those days—"

"By the newspapers, love!" he hastened prudently to declare. "All Paris talked of her when I was living there!"

"You almost live there now!"

"Oh, no; I only run up every two months, and on a cheap excursion ticket. The double journey at single fare, you know, is an inducement. In fact, I have figured it out to be cheaper than staying at home!"

"Madame de Thauzette is giving me lessons in equitation," remarked Martha, in order to play the part of lightning protector and turn the current of wrath from Pontferrand.

What a family! thought the prude. This Parisian adventuress trains the count's sister for the circus and Mdlle. Brissot is taking lessons for the theatre! They will be asking me next to have tickets for their first performance, or benefit, or some such shocking event! And to escape such a tax, and to lecture this lamb on her misguided tastes, she manœuvred to get the latter to show her the new orchid in the conservatory. All breathed the more freely for her withdrawal.

“Your wife has a pretty wit, but bitter!” observed Thouvenin.

André added! “Quite a native wit!”

“Oh, quite French—I mean, bitter as Gaul,” continued Pontferrand. “But come, M. Thouvenin, let us do a smoke in the gardens.”

The inventor acquiesced. The fact is Pontferrand had heard that his new-found friend had the happy knack of getting into “safe” specs.

“Can’t you get a friend on some board?” he queried, after finding how the cold face could relax and the stern smile become hearty upon cultivation. “Guinea-pig, you know? one that could not *boar* you much, ha, ha! But, in all gravity, the Pontferrands are a fine old county family—a *stock* that would redeem any *mess*! It would be an excellent chance for the purse-proud democracy to get hand-and-glove with ye olden nobility; see! Besides, it will give me a good excuse to run up to town.”

“You want to see some little friend of yours in town eh?” queried Thouvenin with a merry smile as little expected by the other as one on a bust of the Incorruptible Robespierre.

Pontferrand gave a great jump, so that his watch-guard rattled.

“Who, who t—t—told you I have any friends, great or little? Ah,” he subjoined with a wry face, “if you

knew how much she costs *me*, you'd think her *very little* my friend. Who—who says so?"

"Everybody and his wife—particularly his wife—round here."

"They are a pack of tattlers," groaned Pontferrand. In fact, all Bardannesville had remarked the man running to the telegraph office at the railway station and never trusting any messenger. It is true all inquiries had been met by the discovery that he telegraphed to a masculine name in the Metropolis. That did not satisfy them. Somehow he managed to get away and remain at Paris for a couple of days. He wagged his head sadly.

"I am afraid that's correct," he sighed.

"With such a *correct* man, no difficulty in getting you upon a board of some sort. You would not look bad as a pirate walking the plank, in fact, with your festive smile and merry air! But to return to a most serious subject, a most serious subject—being a widower, why, oh why, did you tie up again? To punish yourself?"

Pontferrand winced as if the speaker had stepped on a corn. When his first helpmate left him inconsolable he resigned himself to a lonely life. But his kinsfolk, friends, and neighbours would not allow that. They urged that he was bound to marry again for the sake of his daughter, and, this time, still for her sake, to no

frivolous woman. They had looked about for him, and pitched upon one Mdlle. de la Vieille Sententieuse. He married purely for mortification, and what with her dowdiness, her religious views, and her watch over his morals, he was mortified every hour when they were out anywhere together. Pontferrand was such a juvenile old boy that she became jealous of him. In their house they received none but old people, mainly old women. In short, she rendered his life so unbearable that his sorrow completely shifted like the cargo of a ship in a gale. Instead of remaining inconsolable at having lost his first wife, he was inconsolable at having taken another.

To a man of his stripe this new grief seemed to give him the right to console himself, and that is why the gay but desperate dog made these breaks to Paris. Alas! if Pontferrand derived any remorseful entertainment from his derelictions, Clarisse remained under the griffin's claw. Sometimes she and her father raised a laugh together, but the "family extinguisher" would be down upon them directly. It was not a father she wanted as a companion at her age. Her mother did not let her go anywhere without a scouting expedition to total up the piety of the new acquaintances. Until Marthe de Bardannes hallowed the count's with her presence, Clarisse was not allowed to go there.

"Apropos of my poor little girl," said Pontferrand,

seeing the inventor so genial, "I should not mind having such a son-in-law as the master of this house. Is he detached?"

The other intimated that he had no other opinion.

"That's strange, for they say that the pretty little governess—ahem!"

"Well, don't let anybody say that in the father's hearing, or their ears will ring for it!"

"Is he rough like that? Between ourselves, it would not be the first time that a governess became the house-keeper, ha, ha! She is very, very pretty. I would not run up to Paris if my daughter had a governess like that, ha, ha! Hark! where can Madame Pontferrand be?" cried he, as their walk brought them up to the house once more; "that's a very lively air the girl is playing! In both senses of the word it's too fast for Madame P. to approve."

Indeed, Clarisse's mother had hastened to the piano on hearing the keys leap rapidly. But the moment she approached the artful puss ran into the bass notes, and changed the time to that of a funeral march.

"What is that, Clarisse?" demanded mamma almost fiercely.

"Out of an Oratorio, mamma."

"A long way out! For an Oratorio it commenced very lively!"

"It's in two parts, mamma. The first is all about

wedding bells, and the second is the funeral," responded the acute young lady with a demure look, serenely pounding out a doleful passage.

"Put away that sort of music, for I do not intend you to go on the stage!" she said, with a hostile glance towards Mdlle. Brissot.

She hurried Clarisse to follow her and pick up Pontferrand on their way to the gate. As they could not well get out of the dinner invitation, she agreed to come with them in the evening.

"But we must never more come back! This house is no fit place for Clarisse, or even for myself; and tomorrow I will have you go and see the Bishop and tell him that he must come here."

"What for? To hear Mdlle. Brissot sing?" asked Pontferrand innocently.

"No! to take that poor little thing, Martha, away from these dreadful surroundings."

"Why, the Bishop is in town!"

"Well, you can run up to town and acquaint him!"

"I am not so fond of travelling in autumn as all this!" observed that hypocrite Pontferrand.

"I request it!"

"Well, I'll go! You'll overlook my making a wry face! I'll go," he repeated reluctantly.

But as they had to cross the railway metals, he profited by the chance to rush into the telegraph office and wire

that confidential intermediary of his "little friend." As for Clarisse, she was meditative. She had caught a glimpse of Fernand de Thauzette in a riding costume which an Englishman would have said was only fit for a ring-master, and she thought him "simply excruciatingly handsome."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEWITCHING WIDOW

THAT "excruciatingly handsome" young gentleman, Fernand, whom Clarisse so much admired, had come down to the count's with his mother for a hard trial for his natural and cultivated imperturbability in having to face Denise. But she had long since dismissed him from her memory, and, even if he had been insolently bold, she would not have resented any air or speech which was not directed at her. She addressed him in the same tone before others as he used to her; quite familiar like the friends of childhood they had been, and Brissot suspected nothing which a changed attitude might have originated in even his candid mind.

Fernand, relieved by her ignoring him and being no reproach except by her dignified demeanour, turned to divert himself in the neighbourhood during the brief stay. But Clarisse Pontferrand and the like had no

fortune enough to tempt him. The presence of the count's sister was another affair. Here was youth, beauty, a rich dower. His mother was delighted at their coming together. Her frequent visits to the convent-school had not been so much out of pity for the orphan girl as to pave the way to just this acquaintanceship. The Frenchwoman with a marriageable son is a matrimonial agent fully equipped as the goddess sprung from Jupiter's brain.

With his lady-killing airs, so effectual among his town conquests, Fernand would have alarmed the young lady. But he had the hypocrite's gift of transforming himself. Though devoid of faith and scruples, he could well pretend to stifle the tares for a season and give good seed a chance to spring up. The count, who was on his guard against him ever since the Loriac-Fulvières episode, felt constrained to believe, with his fond mother, that he had reformed. Denise alone was assured that this perverse heart could not be regenerated. She watched both Martha and her pursuer, without revealing her task, in every movement of theirs in the house and grounds. Besides, the young girl was her especial charge from the gentleman to whom her family owed the having that roof over their heads. With what pain she marked the progress of the snarer, and her grief became unbearable on this same day when she perceived the young man slip a note into a book on

the table, and, afterwards, whisper the intelligence of its whereabouts to his prey. However, from pride, disdain or prudence, the latter did not act on the hint ; at least, not immediately. Denise let it remain there to see what would be the next step on the part of either in their amorous conspiracy.

In another quarter she determined to check the general lover. Madame de Thauzette and her son had got up a morning riding party with the transparent intention of keeping the lady to themselves. With Madame de Thauzette to keep off the others, Fernand might carry on his court very well at the lady's rein. She went straight to the count, who was showing Thouvenin some plans of a new terrace of labourers' dwellings in the library. She told him that his sister was bad with her nerves that morning, and ought not to go out riding with persons who were so good at equitation as the Thauzettes, and addicted to putting on the pace. So she proposed that her father, who, as an old cavalryman, had nothing to learn as regarded man's noblest conquest, should accompany the young lady and look after her closely.

The count approved, and at once instructed Brissot to get out his horse. Denise he asked to stay a moment, and, with Thouvenin at the window comparing the ground-plan with the site itself in view, he went on in another vein to say :

"I am glad you came into my sanctum, Mademoiselle. With all those people here just now, I could not well ask you if you had recovered from your yesterday's indisposition."

In fact, the arrival of Fernand had sufficiently tried Denise's powers of self-control as to make her avoid appearing at the table with him on the first day. Now she had recovered, felt that she, as the wronged one, was bound not to give way to the villain because he was impudent, and determined to be at the dinner that evening with a calm brow and a bloodless cheek.

"I am quite well, my lord," she responded, with her faint smile, "I have only been upset with anxiety about your sister."

"Ah, some little trouble that, of course, she has told you of," observed the noble, with a slight jealous pang. "She often assures me that she loves you exceedingly."

"I do, indeed, believe that she *had* affection for me ; but she can be capable of distrust, not only with me, but with you, sir ; and that consoles me a little."

"Distrustful of me ? tut, tut !" cried André, though he was not so much surprised as he pretended.

"If your lordship would not mind my being frank," she proceeded, leaning one fine hand on the writing table among the papers not so white.

Said he : "I wish you would every time."

"I am afraid," she uttered feelingly, and with a gravity

that made Thouvenin look round and listen to what was not meant to be a secret for him, "that you do not see enough of your sister ; she has an idea that you do not care much for her."

The count shook his head.

" Nay, I am sure of that, though she has said nothing about it. She is certainly fretting. You must remember, my lord, that she has no father or mother, and that she has been ten long years in the nunnery, and you are her all in this world."

" I am well aware of that, Mademoiselle ; only she has come out of the convent a great grown girl. I saw her rarely then, and every time I did she proclaimed the desire of remaining there and taking the black veil. That did not seem to show much tenderness for me ! "

His laugh was very unreal.

Certainly things had not gone on as he preferred in his limited family. He was a liberal thinker himself, and greatly respected everybody's beliefs. If his sister had a call that way, he would not have hindered her. He knew too well what actual society is like not to understand how a fine and delicate nature might feel instinctive disgust for it, and seek to go straight to Heaven without passing through a street of shops.

His mind was made up to a long farewell to his sister when Brissot came down to his place at that recommendation of Madame de Thauzette, and the

settling down of his family enabled him to give the mere child, as she was, another peep at the life she was about renouncing. He was indubitably a little distant with Martha. He was always afraid of startling or shocking the young mind that had only been fed by holy persons. They had none of those youthful memories which make brother and sister forget that they are neither of the same age and sex. "I have to be as careful of what I say to her as if she were a stranger. What she takes for indifference is nothing but deference. Do you follow me here, Thouvenin ? "

The person addressed nodded and intimated that he had kept himself in the conversation.

"I hope I, too, understand your lordship," went on the girl ; "and that is what I have been trying to make Mdlle. de Bardannes understand. I thought I had succeeded ; but all of a sudden she changed towards me. That would little matter if it were not to be feared that this misunderstanding would make her affectionate trust stray towards unworthy persons."

The count started, but Thouvenin seemed to encourage the speaker with a wise and kindly smile. *

"I must beg you, my lord, to say nothing to her of this confidence. In her present way of thinking, she might take it ill ; and then I should stand in a situation most painful. If you would only go to her and chat with her to win her confidence. This is the advice that

I beg to tender your lordship, with the approval of this gentleman, whom I know to be your best friend."

Thouvenin made her an amicable bow, perhaps more sincere than stylish, and all the more welcome on that account.

"I will act on your counsel," replied Bardannes, rising to see her to the door with old-style courtesy. "Let me tell you how happy I am to find such a treasure as you beside my sister, and to assure you of my highest esteem and my sincere gratitude. As for Martha, tell her I shall be glad to see her when your father brings her safely home, as I am sure he will!"

"By Jove!" exclaimed the inventor with unwonted fire when the door closed, that's a downright charming upright girl! you don't say half what you ought in only calling her a treasure. If I had been Pygmalion, I should have invented just such a model as that!"

"Where are you going?"

"I think of running around the works that I advised you to start. Instead of beetroot sugar, I have a notion, as the Yankees say, that something better might be done with a cheese factory like they are trying in England, after an American original, I believe."

"What a restless character you are! I believe that, were not my home so happy, I should be afraid to leave it for three months now lest, in my absence, you turned the château into a saw-mill or a small-arms factory!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE WASP HAS BUT A SMALL STING, BUT IT MAY
ROUSE A LION

MADAME DE THAUZETTE thought she looked so extremely well in her riding habit, that she hastened down to try its effect on the first comer. M. Thouvenin fell a victim at the first snap of her *whip*, or politely appeared so. This predisposed her, as she rapidly trotted, with much sharp ringing of her heel, to the study, to liveliness. She was a woman who liked to believe that she could not speak for five minutes to a man and hold him with her glittering eyes without his going away enamoured of her.

She rushed in upon the count like a whirlwind, and for a while gushed out her enthusiasm over the pleasure which his country seat afforded. It is the way with the hardened Parisian belle. She sees all things bathed ⁱⁿ sunlight at the foreground, rosy for the middle distance, and blue for the extreme background. She enters

neither cottage nor castle but borne on such a wave of admiration that the owner fears she will remain there high and dry.

"Disturb me not ! here let me live and die !" she cries, and yet, if she hears the whistle of the last train "up," she forgets the wild flowers she gathered with infinite pains in her haste to get the best seat in the middle carriage.

"Perfect !" exclaimed the count when asked for his criticism on the *amazone* of dark red, almost black, of a somewhat eccentric cut having the raised shoulders of the latest deformity in vogue. "When they have ladies in the British Parliament, I shall press to have you sent over as Ambassadress, and I wager the Treaty of Commerce will pass like lightning. A French fox-huntress ! what more marvellous ! "

Without any hyperbole, the lady was a good rider. She was one who appreciated properly the guiding rule of the period : Judge by what one spends, not by what one possesses, and she would any day have bought a new horse for her stables rather than forage for those already there.

"So good of you to come down here," pursued the count. "I am so wholesomely employed here that I have forgotten the town."

"Apart from the sincere pleasure, my old friend, I should have come, for I have been harbouring a

proposition now quite ripe for unfolding. I came post haste."

" You came in the post-boy's boots and spurs, any way," said André, as the lady coquettishly made play with her feet in and out of the folds of the train.

" I put them on after I left church with Madame de Pontferrand still there. A very little of her whining the responses goes a long way ; and I am afraid that even less of her at dinner will make me wish her still further ! "

" Oh ! it's true that you went to church, then ? "

" Why, I go *every* Sunday," answered she, sitting on the nearest pile of books in a pretty, *opéra comique* cavalier manner scarcely in concord with a religious devotee.

" And what the dev—— mischief do you go there to do ? "

" I go there to pray."

" And confess your peccadilloes ? "

" A couple of times a year does that, sir ! "

" Once in the winter and once in the summer ? Is that enough ? "

" Fully. I should like you to believe so at present, anyhow."

" Ah, you will indeed become a saint ! "

" Very likely. But, dear boy, what is a fashionable

lady to do when she gets old and is no longer pretty if not turn pious?"

"You will never grow old."

"Generally, I am of your opinion. I can go hunting all day long without wanting my 'second wind,' and I can dance all night without asking to be led to a chair."

"And you can love all the time into the bargain. Who are you in love with at this moment?"

"No one. That's all over. I must get Fernand married off my hands. We will see about the regular business afterwards."

Her hearer had turned grave, as if her son's name was a dash of cold water, and there was no echo to her airy laugh from him.

"Are you very fond of this son of yours?" he demanded.

"Why, I doat on him; such a tall fellow, and so handsome. And I easily understand all the women running after him as well as the constable, ha, ha!"

"Does he tell you his good fortune that way?"

"You must be jesting. He never, never says a word about such things to his mother."

"I would not believe it."

"Most seriously. To outsiders I say anything that comes into my head. But when with my son, it is another matter. What I know of his adventures is by hearsay, and he must believe that I am ignorant

of them. However, he has quieted down a good deal lately ; he is much more orderly, more serious, and I see more of him. He has turned seven-and-twenty, which may be the reason. Come, you were his college mate ; he can't deceive you. I married at eighteen, so calculate : I was eighteen, and now he is twenty-seven, making me, with due allowance, forty-six. Horrible ! ”

“ Only twenty-three in the morning, and another twenty-three at night,” observed André, gaily.

She sprang up, tripped across the oak floor with her train over her arm, and went to a large mirror with a black walnut frame of a hunting subject to adjust her man’s hat more mathematically straight, her tendency, like all women’s, being to give it a cock only permissible to the felt Lavallière.

“ That’s no’ so bad ! ” said she, coming back to lounge on the high back of his coroneted chair. “ But a truce to frivolity. I have a strict secret to impart ! Remember ! ” threatening him playfully with her agate-headed whip.

“ I promise, and I listen,” replied the count, resigned, but pricking up his ears to hear Brissot call out that the cavalcade awaited this cross of Di. Vernon and Lady Gay.

“ The persons concerned are quite—quite, mind you —unaware of the step I am taking with you, and if

this step leads to nothing, it is useless their being informed."

The count nodded.

"Do you think about marrying off your sister Martha?"

"It depends upon with whom," he rejoined, startled into genuine interest at length.

"I suggest my Fernand."

"It is you that must be joking now. No'" severely.

"Why not?"

"I have reasons," gravely.

"What has Fernand done?"

"Many things, madame!" with even more gravity.

"Name one, only one now!" she pleaded.

"Why did he fight a duel with M. de Fulvières?" asked André, after the hesitation of a man embarrassed with a plenitude of choice.

"Would you have preferred Fernand swallowing the insult M. de Fulvières threw at him? Your De Fulvières got a sword through him, and serve him right for what he had the impudence to say!"

"What did he say?"

"That Fernand had a 'winning way'—particularly at cards; merely because Fernand won a trifle of De Lorian."

"The trifle of one hundred thousand francs! after

giving poor De Loriac a lonely dinner in a quiet restaurant."

"Those Loriac people should not play cards above penny points," returned she, loftily.

"Not without markers to keep the game and keep the brandy back."

"How do you know Fernand did not drink fair?"

"He never drinks! winners of a turn at 100,000 never do!"

"That's another feather in his cap!" cried she, triumphantly; but it drew no applause. "Well, whether he drank fair or not, he played fair!"

"If I did not believe that, he would not be here under my roof," went on the nobleman, proudly.

"The case is one of those of which they say, legally: Judgment is suspended. I guaranteed his honour by serving as his second in that duel entirely for your name's sake! Your husband was an old friend of mine, almost a father to me, and I could not permit public shame to fall on his name. They might say that his bad blood was his father's, and I do not care to have George de Thauzette's son accused of infamy."

"Did you like George as much as that—so much your elder?"

"Madly, you would think, for women cannot comprehend love for an elder—equal, and yet respectful, though not that given to one's father. He was nigh

double my age, and I loved him wholly at twenty—my pilot in the shoals of society. He was poor compared with me, but he never accepted a penny's worth for saving me from the sharks. His premature death was a sad and painful cloud over my early life. It was to try and forget his loss that I plunged for years into the disorder from which he had shielded me, and from which Thouvenin finally drew me."

"George was very good to me," said the lady, musing, "and I cease to be merry when I am reminded of him. Come, for his sake, cast round his son the safeguard of marriage. Let us strike up an eternal alliance between us by marriage of my son, *his* son, and your sister. What a pleasing union on which to bring down the curtain! Now that I am a matron, you see I'll settle down with you, Fernand, and my daughter-in-law; and I will become a Quakerish housekeeper for you." She rattled on, believing her point carried from her colloquist's persistent silence. "When you get married, for your turn will come," at which she was too engrossed in her glee to see him wince, "your wife will find it quite natural that I should remain with you all. I am going to become a rare kind of mother-in-law, and a unique grandmother. What a grace will keep me young! like the fabled women of yore, it will be the pleasure of my old age to rear the children. Are you not agreeable?"

"No."

There was so much sternness in the negative that she experienced a revulsion of feeling. She drew off like one preparing for a death struggle, and hissed—

"You are making a mistake, my dear; for somebody will be unhappy if these young people do not wed."

"Is that a threat?" he cried, rising quickly from his chair.

"No, a supposition that Martha is in love with Fernand."

For some reason, this rejoinder did not meet his anticipation, and he slightly smiled as he said :

"In that case, Martha must wait until she is a free woman. At her majority she may marry Fernand, and then I'll acquit her, and her husband and you, for having brought this union about; for I understand at last why you went so frequently to the convent, and your reviving our old acquaintance since Martha came here."

She did not deny the accusation. The action being at this point, the experienced woman of the world meant to see it out.

"My lord, you cannot marry your sister off but under particular conditions; her husband and the family of her husband must accept her. You appear not to see your true situation."

He gave a short dry laugh, for his monetary position was incontestable.

"Your situation as regards Mdlle. Brissot."

"What do you mean by that?" he broke forth fiercely, like one who came upon an enemy "flagging" a mine quite unsuspected in that quarter.

"The meaning is that you are her sweetheart."

"The sweetheart of Mdlle. Brissot? Who says any such thing?"

"Everybody. When a man of your rank, at your time of life, coops himself up in his country house, all alone, with an old steward whose young daughter is pretty, you cannot prevent people, especially rural people, supposing that you are her lover. What is there strange in that? all the less strange because you are probably not her first——"

At this slur the count seemed about to order the woman from his presence; his hand hovered over the spring-bell, and was as if reluctantly withdrawn. In that instant the spark had fired a magazine of jealousy, and he became the martyr in a conflagration. With an effort he managed to control his first impulse. His voice was hardly articulate in the first sentence as he said:

"It was you who recommended Mdlle. Brissot to me! I set her here beside my sister, and now you come and utter an abominable and double accusation against her!"

I forbid this! I begin by declaring to you on my honour that Mdlle. Brissot occupies here the plainest and most respectable situation; and now tell me what you know about her."

She had been so far appalled at the tempest of indignation let loose, but now sought to retreat to the door. He dashed forward and even seized her wrist that she should not escape like a Parthian. She turned pale, but no pain could make the Parisian leader of fashion forget the etiquette imbibed at the maternal fount, as M. Joseph Prudhomme would say.

"To begin with," said she, "let me call your attention to the fact that you are squeezing my wrist more tightly than everyou did my hand." There, that's better!" with an earnest sigh at the relief. But, wishful to have her revenge, as she saw the fine skin dark where the cuff-stud had been pressed in, she added bitterly: "So you have been caught by the dresses that come up high, and the eyes that go down so low; goodness gracious, what stupids you men are! I want you to remember that I never recommended Mdlle. Brissot. I only recommended her father. She was not in my mind at all, and is not to my mind! Brissot is no electric light, but he is evidently an honest man, and makes a good bailiff. It was you who took the fancy to bring the mother and daughter into your house, to go about praising the one and stay at home falling in

love with the other. That's your look-out ; but as for trying to stop Mdlle. Brissot being slandered, you cannot succeed, dear fellow. Where is the woman that nobody speaks ill of ? Why, even I get talked about ! ”

“ But you—— ” began the count most impolitely.

“ Much obliged ! ” with a hollow laugh. “ You mean to say it was a good thing George died before he found out I flirted ! ”

“ In short, let me know what you know,” resumed the other persistently.

It was looking like being in a corner. Her tone altered considerably. It was no longer spiteful. A little more and she would have apologized on seeing his distress. But this man had blocked up the path of her son to fortune and alliance with a noble old house.

“ I do not know anything. I merely suppose that this pretty girl who has the run of the house, who gives lessons in one thing and another, and who was going to take singing lessons the other day to come out on the stage—I suppose she has not waited to be three-and-twenty before feeling her heart jump. But my horse is neighing for me. I had better go, for I do not want to cause you pain. I know better than most how tender a man in love is. George was awful ! And yet I have heard him characterized as an extremely ‘ hard case.’ ”

The count had not heard her final sentences. Returned to the writing desk, he had let himself sink into the high deep chair under the portrait of his father. His corrugated brow, clouded but blazing eyes, and firm-set mouth made even that featherbrain acknowledge her attempt at consolation was in vain. She left the room on tiptoe, in strong contrast to her noisy entrance, and moodily traversed the house to the starting point of the riding party.

CHAPTER X.

THE MAN WHO DOATED ON SENSATIONS

WHEN Thouvenin descended into the grounds before the house he found them enlivened by the group of horses held by the stable lads. Fernand, with some uneasiness on his brow, for he interestedly awaited the result of the conversation between his mother and the count, was flicking his natty boot and spur with a fancifully-mounted whip. Already he felt some awe as regards the cold and methodical inventor, whom he envied too for his knack of money-making.

“Ah, coming with us?” enquired he, genially. “There’s a horse yonder, the iron grey, about up to your weight.”

“No,” was the reply, “I have had a constitutional this morning. I crossed you, I think——”

“I dare say you did. I dashed over to the market town for a book at the railway bookstall for the young lady ~~at~~ the house. Astonishing how these misses in

their teens from the convent want to read rubbishing novels."

They walked up and down on the lawn as they continued their dialogue.

"I did not notice you," continued the younger.

"I was some way off, and you seemed in a hurry. You were probably not thinking of man, but of woman —some pretty woman."

"Probably! Truth to tell, this is about all I do think of," he returned, smiling.

"Have you been long at this noble game?"

"Since I was sixteen or so; that's the age now."

Thouvenin shrugged his shoulders doubtingly. Not that he had never been a victim of the grand passion. But his boyhood was spent at the work-bench, and his early manhood in making money to support his aged mother and nourish his costly experiments. At present he was in love, but with his wife only, as any time these dozen years. He had vowed to win her and be affectionate towards none other. It was one of Thouvenin's weaknesses to keep his word.

"Loved only your wife?" queried Fernand, with as much incredulity as his interlocutor had shown, "At what time did you marry?"

Thouvenin was twenty-eight when he ceased playing the Benedict, and he was now over forty. The other laughed heartily.

"I do not see anything funny in that," said the inventor. "It would be odd to act otherwise. Is a man to keep on telling two or more women that he is in love with them all? When a man tells a woman that he loves her it should be a lifelong pledge. Instead of repenting after, one should consider before! Just think what there is in saying to one that you love those holy things that one says to mother and children."

"But one does not talk the same things to all women."

"But one should."

"Nonsense! For my part, after a week's gallivanting, I cannot find any novelty; and for the most part women are willing to drop a worn subject. The basis of love on both sides is fancy, weariness, the yearning for novelty, mystery, and danger itself. When a man has seen as much life as I have, he knows that love has little to do with a woman's marriage."

"Oh, that's only your opinion."

"I am quite sure. It is simple enough; setting aside those women only too eager to be decorated with the name of sweethearts."

"I dispense with them too with pleasure," interposed Thouvenin, contemplating the speaker like an entomologist inspecting a curious insect.

"As for married women," went on the profound philosopher, "the love they pretend is nothing but lassitude and disgust for the meek mate who never

knew how to win them. It is not love, but spite, or a thirst for revenge."

"And young girls?"

"They wed out of routine or curiosity, and they cannot understand what they are doing, because they will never know what love is until they are married. None love the man she weds; she prefers him to others, that's all, when it is no calculation of fortune or clutch of ambition."

"And what about those maids," said the elder, in a measured tone and a tremor of sentiment, "who surrender without the guarantee of marriage, at risk of their fame, and who kill themselves when they are abandoned?"

"What a life they lead who are foolish enough to marry such fools!" returned the young man more nonchalantly than heartlessly. "Poverty condemns them to solitude, and they cling to the dim hope that their lover will marry them, and they lose their senses when they find themselves tricked."

"But, at least, they do their duty."

"Duty! do you know what duty is? It is what one requires of others."

His hearer was staggered by the cynical definition, and, taking his stupefaction for a yielding to conviction, the new theorist in morality ran on:

"Let's out with the truth, putting aside all the lyrical

and sentimental fables called Love. It is a battle between the sexes : the two opponents know very well what they are after, and all's fair in a war of love. The women must take care of themselves before the action, and the men afterwards, and woe to the vanquished ! ”

“ What about the camp followers—the children ? ”

“ Oh, they are the accidents of gallantry and the burdens of marriage .”

“ According to you, then, we do not owe anything to women ? ”

“ Stay, respect and maternity when we marry them ; pleasure and secrecy when we do not.”

“ Your god is Don Juan, I see ? ”

“ Yes ; Don Juan ! the only man who ever got the best of the versatility of women. All was fish to him, I may even say ‘ fishy,’—Elvira, Donna Anna, Zerlina, one an abducted wife, another a runaway miss, another the maid beguiled from his valet. They sang him precisely the same thing morning, noon, and night, but they sang it in a different voice.”

“ What about the Commander ? the avenger ! ” interjected Thouvenin, with emphasis.

Fernand laughed gaily. Indeed, on that pleasant lawn, before the rich man's château, with servants to hold the costly horses, flowers in the sunlight, it was hard to imagine there were serious and deadly deeds possible.

"The Commander!" he echoed, with undiminished mirth. "I should not at all mind his coming with all the flames and fumes of Down-below so long as he had a pretty daughter to justify the pistol-bullet I would give him and the supper I would offer him. The Commander would be welcome if he gave a sensation the more. Love would not be tolerable but for sensations."

Thouvenin understood this war-cry of the young man of our times.

"You remind me of one of my friends," he began.

"So flattered, very——"

"Who was a police spy——"

"Eh! what the deuce——"

"Well, a private detective, if you prefer it."

"I compliment you on your friends!" sneered Fernand, standing off a little.

"And yet," replied the not easily confounded Thouvenin, "I am rather nice in my choice that way!" as much as to say that never would he have so classed the person before him. "Well, my friend used to talk like you: he said that in his profession, somewhat discredited, but quite as full of emotion as that of the betrayers of young women, he also had delightful sensations. When he shook a comrade's hand, or smoothed down a friend's back whom he was going to pump of his secrets to get him arrested, imprisoned, and transported, without the

other having the least suspicion. When he would go afterwards to see him in his cell or during the final interview with his wife and children while he shed crocodile tears over them and witnessed his Will, and still the poor devil suspected nothing. My friend went on to say that such sensations would make such as yours mere fleabites. However, he had a big sensation to come ; the biggest he ever had, I believe. It's true it was the last one, when he was caught in a dark street, apparently deserted, between three and four o'clock a.m., and three or four chaps—able-bodied—waiting for him, and who caned him to death ; he must for a few moments have experienced sensations which you have not felt yet. But," concluded the speaker without any change in his incisive accent, "you are young yet, and I may hope you will with all my heart!"

The young man's face glowed, and his hand twitched the riding whip.

"Allow me to tell you, sir!" he began, with a rising inflection.

But there was an efflux of the servants at the angle of the verandah, and Mdlle. Brissot and her mother, to see Mdlle. Martha and Fernand's mother mount their steeds. As he swallowed his angry words Thouvenin met his fiery glare firmly, and observed : "If this subject interests you, though, we will resume it as soon as you please!"

"A cursedly cool devil," muttered the other, turning away discomfited. "They tell me he improved that saloon pistol of Ruzé's, and practised eighteen hours a day for four months before he would pronounce his tests sufficient. It would be suicide to go out with him, hang him!"

Madame de Thauzette was visible in the glass doorway. She wore a mien so far from exultant that her son went up to her as if merely to assist her to reach the saddle.

"Well?" he queried, warmly.

"I put the question."

"Formally?"

"No. You are supposed to know nothing about it; do not betray yourself."

He smiled. He was not the sort to betray *himself*.

"Well?" with much impatience.

"He refuses."

"Any reason?"

"That old rubbish about M. de Loriae."

"Is that all?"

"It seems quite enough; but there's another hitch. He's in love himself."

"With Denise? Oh, we know that."

"How do you know it?" cried Madame de Thauzette, as much astounded by the remark as her son's unconcern.

"It wasn't hard to discover! This comes round beautiful! He'll marry Denise, I'll marry Martha, and we'll all be happy! Come, and may we clear all obstacles as easily!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE LION IN THE LOOP

THANKS to Brissot sticking like a burr to the rein of Mdlle. de Bardannes, it was as impossible for Madame de Thauzette to speak a more than ordinarily tender word to the young noblewoman as for Fernand himself to do so. The old soldier bore the black looks of one and the sharp offended glances of the other with the same provoking unconcern. Whether the pace was quickened or slackened, Mdlle. de Bardannes could not shake off her shadow. She enjoyed the riding party very little more than the others, naturally ; and they returned sooner than they intended.

As soon as the ladies retired to their rooms to change out of their riding habits, and Fernand went to chew the bitter cud of his fancy along with an unlit cigarette in the park, Brissot, chuckling to himself without very well knowing in whose wheel he had inserted a spoke, collected an armful of accounts and went to find his master in the library. He thought, whilst the ladies

were engaged, this would be a fine opportunity to get some of the business over, which, lately, the count had begun to shirk.

In fact, on this occasion too, no sooner had he seen the file than he shivered with comic dread. He hemmed a little, and finally bade the good fellow shoot them down on some corner of the table. Then, with an embarrassed mien, like a sportsman who has put a charge of shot in the host's favourite pointer, he beckoned the bailiff to wait.

"As you say we have a moment or two without fear of interruption, suppose we have a little talk apart from affairs."

Brissot took a chair, and sat up in a cordial-respectful posture.

"I want a good deal more of leisure, though, to thank you properly for your many a good office. It is all very well being grateful to Thouvenin, but you are also much to be thanked for my lands becoming fruitful, my farmers paying prompt, my expenses lessening by twenty-five per cent., and yet my style of house-keeping being vastly superior to when I was going to the dogs. So in case anything happens—and in these days of Radicalism the landed gentry do not seem so perfectly immortal as of yore—I have put it down in black and white, so that you need not fear in the future what visited you in days gone by."

Before his pen lay, indeed, a very legal-looking paper, which was topped with a "Whereas" in old text so black and funereal as to give the looker-on a cold, creeping sensation. The count made an apologetic movement at this sympathy, and went on in rather a John Blunt style to say what he thought.

"I find it always advisable to know just how things stand. By the way, let me learn something from you about my guests, the Thauzettes."

Though they both had had the cavalry colonel for an acquaintance, or even friend, this was the first time that they had supplemented one another's knowledge by the particulars familiar to either. Between them —the count having more than a transient peep into Thauzette's past career, and the bailiff having associated with him previously and after in the army and the company officer—they constructed a perfect character.

From that they discussed the widow and her son, and the dialogue came round to the point on which André's heart was planted as the little bird on a thorn by the butcher bird. Perhaps we are wrong to give Cupid angelic plumage; rather his wings should be those of the shrike. How many hearts he thus impales to be devoured by fate, scorched by the sun, drenched by the rain, and shrivelled by the blast!

"That sojourn in the sunny south," concluded Brissot, affectionately, after repeating the story we have more

elaborately recited, "restored my darling to full bloom, to say nothing of my wife being much the better. I don't say they were as gay as larks, but they were looking up all round. Just then Thauzette's widow recommended me to your lordship, and we were set up as high and cocky as you please. Madame de Thauzette is a bit of a rattlebrain, we all know that ; but still she means harm to no one, and I shall never forget what we owe to her."

The count was relieved of some doubt by the words, and if his expression was tempered with pain, it was only a regret at having raked up past sorrows in the old soldier.

"Never mind, that's all over now, thank heaven and your lordship."

"Are you quite sure ?" commenced the master, after a pause of which neither was conscious of the true duration. He assumed a more gravely earnest tone than at any time before, saying, "Brissot, hark you ! Come to think over it, tell me now, may not your daughter cherish a lingering love for Fernand ? His mother is a widow, and her money was not what her husband ought to have left. They have made a big hole in it since. They are rather pinched, to tell the truth, and would scarcely be so grasping and haughty as once upon a time. If your daughter had a dower, Fernand might be attracted again, and if she still cares for him——"

Brissot shook his grey head.

"Denise nurses no spite, my lord," said he, "but she has her pride. She has forgiven, and she has forgotten. No reason will make her revive the past. Besides, which saves any discussion, she has no more dower than five years ago."

"But, my dear M. Brissot," answered the count, with a smile most significant, "if there is no other hindrance——"

"I must ask you, my lord, not to say what you intend after what you did say," cried the soldier, proudly, and sitting up more like a ship's figure-head than before.

The count had risen, and took a turn up and down the apartment before suddenly holding out his hand.

"There's nothing I beg to offer you but that," said he, frankly.

A tear stood in the old man's eye as he wrung the hand with a cordial grip. It was an awkward juncture, for each felt that some more searching and intimate inquiry was suspended over their heads, one of those explosive sparks which terminate a slow match, and in one instant fire the shot up to which the train so slowly led.

To the relief of both, Thouvenin came bounding in. He had been inspecting the works and the buildings, in the designs of which his pencil had corrected minute

details. He ran about Bardannesville with the affectionate sympathy which he did not show for places where his own money and fame were engaged. He was delighted, and thought that Brissot kept the workmen up to time and saw everything in military order.

As Brissot, beaming with the inventor's reflected eulogy, bowed himself out, the count asked him not to go far, as he might require him shortly. He proposed a journey. Thouvenin, for whom the remark did not seem unintended, was no sooner left alone with the speaker than he took up the sentence.

"Quite true, I am going away," answered the count.

"That's the first I heard of your intention."

"I start sharp on my caprices."

"You are that kind, I have noticed. Going any particular way?"

"I think you said you were about off? Whereabouts?"

"Oh, I've got to go to Odessa; there's a whole grain fleet at stake."

"Taking your wife?"

"No, only my man."

"Open for a companion?"

"I guess I am!" returned the other, more and more surprised.

He could easily understand that André's sudden journey should have no end, or some end other than

his; but the coincidence of his being determined by business and the count's by a freak was too illogical for a man of method to accept it. Besides—unless to "talk shop," inventions, practical science, figures, and measure off things with Whitworth rules to the 100,000th of an inch—he was not a travelling companion for whom a nobleman would reasonably leave home, sports, a sister, and tranquillity.

"I am obliged to have a change," observed the latter, "and forget."

"All about?—"

"Myself."

"Oh! what the deuce has come over you?"

"I wanted to tell you. In your delicacy and friendship I have great confidence. Already I am much indebted to you, and I cannot square up better with you than by keeping nothing back that touches me deeply."

"I don't see that you owe me anything," replied Thouvenin. "The boot is on the other leg, for I shall be your debtor everlastingly."

He threw away the cigar with which he had been toying ever since the count's project of leaving home was announced, and spoke with more feeling than was his wont.

"The balance is in your favour, for you must not think me ungrateful. Anyhow, we are warm friends, and so, fire away!"

"I have a fancy for—no, that's an expression for passing emotion—I am in love."

"All on one side?" inquired the other, with a searching look.

"I daresay not."

"I guessed as much. Nothing lop-sided in nature! Any one I know?" cheerily rattling on to embolden the other.

"The daughter of the excellent man who just left us."

"Oh, Brissot's," cried Thouvenin, not very much astonished, though a slight cloud temporarily dimmed his eyes.

But on reflection, seeing the girl so chastely beautiful, so patiently bearing her cross, and masking her secret with courage in order to keep her father's name untarnished to all but him and her faithless lover, he confessed that De Bardannes' weakness was explicable.

"Told her yet?"

"Not a word!" trembling.

"The sooner the better! Brood over your idea only till it formulates into a design. Get that down in 'line and wash,' and then secure the contract."

"But she may not respond—"

"Ask her anyhow!—it's the best and only way to extract information from the fair creatures."

"But if she were to say no?"

"Believe she means the contrary! nine out of ten times they do! If she says yes, why you are all right."

"You forget the social bar—she is poor and I am rich."

"Afraid she is 'on the make'? I don't believe that. I size her up into a different grade. She is A 1 in the extra special class. I warrant that, if she has any inclination your way, she will pack it down; so much would she fear not only others suspecting it, but herself letting it out. She has done nothing to catch your eye and hook your heart, I am sure; why, her very gratitude, like her father's and mother's, is only manifested by the most worthy and seemly attitude. But what a glorious surprise you will enjoy as soon as you tell her that you have set your choice on her to be your life-long companion! from her pride and joy to the sincerest passion it will be no wide step. That's just how it came about with this child, any way. I selected a good-looking, good-acting, good-wearing bit of womanhood with never a penny to bless herself, and I thank heaven every night that I went no farther and fared worse."

"I am of your way of thinking," replied the young noble, enlivened by his unusual fire.

Often and often he had, like some wealthy and romantic men, thought he should like to feast himself

on that sublime sight of suddenly realizing all the wish of a poor virtuous girl.

Thouvenin studied him with the mock air of a physician for a few moments. Then he glanced round, and finally perceived the document on the writing pad.

"Been remembering the Brissots in your Will ! ha, ha ! that's a decisive symptom. It's a case—you'll have to marry the young lady."

"Even if I am only the second comer ?" retorted the count, sharply.

"What do you mean ?" cried the other, turning pale for fear the secret which he, too, had locked up so long was freely afloat.

"Madame de Thauzette says——"

"She'll say anything !" cried Thouvenin, relieved in some degree. "A cat. Not, perhaps, a common tabby like poor Pontferrand's Second, but Persian, fashionable, fine, but with the same dangerous claws. You never consulted that Angora on your tender state ?"

"No !" rejoined André, relating how he had betrayed himself.

"Betray yourself to a widow who is setting her cap at you ! It's no go shaking your head. She does ! She'd have had you for her Number Two, only Thauzette was too long her mate for you not to be too young for her when she was free. It's the old cat's spite to slander the woman that's cut her out

now ! Who's going to attach weight to any stuff such an easy-going party says ? When a woman's accused of such a thing, the charge must be precise. Did she venture to name the other ? ”

“ She could not well do that ; because it might be her son.”

“ That sneak, Fernand ? ” roared the inventor, smacking the desk with his fist as if he had a hated head under it. “ I credited her with better taste ! ”

“ Be that as it may,” went on the count, sadly, “ he and Mdlle. Brissot were playmates—she loved him so much that there was a tacit engagement between them, and she nearly fretted to death when he jilted her.”

“ Just like him ; and just the way when a girl has no coin. But may be she sent him off with a flea in his ear, or her father did. Old Captain Brissot looks to me very like the man that would get out the old sword and pistols on any gay Lothario that kissed and rode away.”

“ He may have seen nothing wrong. The young lady used to go about Paris to give lessons.”

“ I'll lay you what you like that her mother was always along ! Why, they watch that girl like an unregistered trade mark ! ”

“ There is always a stormy day when mamma will not risk her new hat,” returned André, with the

readiness of jealousy to trump up a retort that would torment him the more.

Thouvenin, though heaven knows he feared that he was defending a lost cause, maintained his position with the obstinacy distinguishing such men.

"But the pair of them would not chat so affectionately if there had been any row between them; no, sir!"

"A girl guarding her reputation can show no end of boldness, coolness, and impudence."

"Go along with you," roared Thouvenin, who, his ground being so hollow, made up for the weakness by a louder voice and more random arguments.

Before his eyes the landscape, spite of the present bright sun, was gloomy as with morning haze; there was a rivulet yonder which took the aspect of that brawling brook of the South of France, and the pale form of Denise stood there, embracing the poor little unconscious child. As quickly as it appeared it vanished, for that cool brain was not long or often prey to visions. Thouvenin felt that, perchance, on him depended the happiness of two loving hearts.

"I do not understand this stubborn idea of yours," resumed he. "In one place you tell me that Madame de Thauzette recommended the Brissots. Very well, then she would not have had the cool cheek—I dare say ~~you~~ *fashionables* would say the *pschut nonchalant*; but

t's the same thing boiled down—to do so if her son had been successful with the girl—even that brazen youth would not dare face her, unless, good gracious! they are still linked——”

“That cannot be,” said the count, a little comforted.

Indeed, this was the first time that Fernand had come down to Bardannesville, and apparently only to be at hand when his mother formally sought Martha's brother's consent to the proposal. Besides, Denise had no correspondence with any one whatsoever; and, as for little trips after the manner of the virtuous Pontferrand, she no more quitted the village than the oldest inhabitant who had not seen a milestone beyond the market town.

“I repeat,” said Thouvenin, “he is not' the man. It's all a bogey! You lovers are always scaring up some spectre because you would be too happy as facts stand. It's just like the magic mechanism which would not tell on the audience unless, after the wheel-work is complete, a bit of noisy flutter-fan went off with an alarum. Perfectly superfluous, but tops the piece with effect. She would never come asking you your sister's hand when that sister lives in such close daily relations with Mdlle. Brissot as to be under her influence. She would put a stop to the game.”

The count was unimpressed by this argument. He

knew already, better than another, that his sister was not one easily influenced against the purpose in her brain. The secluded life had changed her dreaminess into romance, that was all, and romantic people dwell in a world of their own.

"Another thing," said he, in a deep voice, more pained than purely reflective, "how can you expect Mdlle. Brissot to denounce her betrayer—if that be so—when he has only to speak one word in his probable anger to ruin her?"

His auditor shuddered.

"How do you know but that Madame de Thauzette, consulted all along, placed Denise especially beside Martha to further the plot?"

"In that case Madame de Thauzette would not accuse an accomplice, and that accomplice would not have suggested her father should ride at Martha's rein to keep off Fernand," cried Thouvenin, warming up again. "It is clear she saw which way the wind sets, and gave you a hint as delicately as possible. That's not like one who is frightened at the person she contravenes."

"Well, not being he, who is it?" said the count, with a steady frown which even so soon showed what ravages suspicion may rapidly make on a loving heart. "This is not all either," continued he, with scorn and hate in his accent for the very woman whom he so

servently loved the noon before. "I discover here my mode of living makes the gossips esteem Mdlle. Brissot no better than a young gentleman's pretty and young housekeeper is rated. So I find I am injuring one whom, may be, I cannot marry. Don't you see that I had best cut away?"

"No, I do not. I do see, though, that you arrogate too much. You do not get the daughter's life-story thrown in with her father's services, do you? he earns every franc of it, I guarantee."

"But I must know, to have a fit judgment on human nature, whether her proud yet bashful bearing is not play-acting, if she does not build on the impression she's made here," he went on, beating his breast.

Indeed, without imputing an affection for André, there was no improbability in a woman entertaining an idea of marrying a title and money just to spite her wronger by showing how others valued the treasure he spurned. "The Jew that threw the pearl away," &c., rose in Thouvenin's mind, though he was no play-goer. Many a man does turn back for the prize he let fall on seeing others make a rush for it.

"You do not understand my feeling, Thouvenin, I fear. In all women's lives only one man can have the first wondering caress, of course, and none other can blot him out! When another is really beloved, it is because he reminds them of the first. By heaven!"

he proceeded, so passionately that his companion was astounded, "if ever I imagined that my wife's calm, candid, coolly-smiling face concealed the full particulars of some deed on which my life, my honour, and my bliss depended, and yet that would remain eternally unseizable—I would split that beloved and impassible forehead with an axe and tear out the brain that coffined my problem!"

His clenched hand descending on the table-desk made the ink fly out of the dish, but in their mood neither of the men perceived the spattering on the bailiff's paper; man of method that he was, however, he would not have remained so indifferent. Thouvenin indulged in a low, long-drawn whistle of amazement. He could no longer mistake the deep-rootedness of his friend's love, and, more than ever, he congratulated himself on having suppressed his share in the secret.

"So stands the matter," said the count. "I must get clear of this fix, as you'd call it—how?"

"There's only one way," answered the counsellor, "pay no heed to what you have heard, and ask her parents for her hand. If she be guilty and loves you not, her simple answer will be that she's not 'on the marry,' and you'll have to swallow the pill. If she does have you, and is guilty, she will tell the truth, though the devil stood at the door. That's her sort."

" Give such a secret to a stranger, not knowing the use he'd make of it ? Nonsense ! "

" The stranger being a gentleman, she'll know he'll keep quiet."

" But she'll know that I'll never marry her after that confession."

" What's the odds if you adore her ? It always comes round to that."

The count stamped his foot angrily, and then paced the room muttering a formidable vow.

" Come, come," supplicated Thouvenin, " and don't let your pride go rampaging about too soon ! The heart has arguments not in the brain, my boy ! Meanwhile, I have proposed the only way worthy of the pair o' ye," he concluded, rising as if, the discussion having gone the round and entering its starting place, he detested wasting words.

" There may be another," muttered the nobleman, so menacingly that the other turned back and, going to him, laid his hand on one of his shoulders. " Take care, old fellow ! It's not only your love at stake, but the fair fame of a woman—her very life, perhaps ! —the peace of her father, who loves you like a son, and of her mother ! not only has neither done you no harm, but both would go through fire and water for you ! Look out, I say ! "

" Thanks, old friend," said the count, returning the

warm, strong pressure of his hand with interest. "I shall not be rash!"

He returned to his chair, and Thouvenin left him in profound meditation. But on the way out he met Martha, who was obeying her brother's invitation.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WILFULNESS OF MAIDEN LOVE

As Martha walked without briskness in towards her brother, he looked up, and, seeing her lack of animation, inquired tenderly if she were fatigued with the ride.

“No, André, it is not that with which I am tired,” she answered pertly; “but never mind that now. Tell me first what you have to say.”

“Martha, dear, you don’t seem to trust me much.”

“Who says so?” sharply.

“I can easily see it. You are not like a sister.”

“Who’s to blame?” she went on, in the same snapping, almost impertinent tone, rather opposed to her features being sweet and her changed dress being a fresh white and cream, suggestive of unaffected simplicity. “You mean to say that it is you who are not like a brother.”

“I do all I can to please you.”

“Have you been at that long?”

“Ever since we have been together.”

“That’s no great while,” with a triumphant toss of the fine head, as if this were a crushing rejoinder.

“I was sorry it could not be sooner.”

“What prevents loving brother and sister living together?” she demanded, with less harshness.

“It’s awkward when they are orphans.”

Martha shook her head: his reason seemed to be against the summing up.

“Particularly when the brother is a man of rank, and he cannot bring home the companions of his pleasures. While you amused yourself—for I grant it quite natural you should not give up your pleasures for poor little insignificant me—I was moping in the convent,” with a piteous sigh and yawn. “I was badgered in every act and word, and thought too, and yet you are going to send me back there!”

“We have no relation that I would care to trust you with.”

“There’s one guardian,” she cried, with substantial pride, her eyes sparkling and her gentle frame stiffening, “that is Martha de Bardannes—myself! my pride of race will guard me better than any one—I should run no danger!”

“That’s all very fine for the English and Americans,” responded the count, with an amused smile at this outcome of novel reading and the ferment of mental

expansion, "but we have different manners. We would shock a circle which lays down the law to such as we, and it never revokes a judgment. I took you out of the cloister just as soon as I found an honest woman to be in your mother's stead with a kind, intelligent, educated daughter, who might be your friend, and I associated you with my daily round. Do you complain of them?"

"I am afraid I might!" was her reply, more timidly than before.

Frowning, he called on her to expose her grievances, but she evaded the challenge with a show of politeness that compelled her to hear him out first.

"It is not that you are cold-blooded and incapable of affection: that is not the defect of the Bardannes. Look at our parents' love-fraught life, and father dying of a broken heart in old age. But, whilst you have had so little to show me, you have showered it on Madame de Thauzette."

"She was the only person who saw me regularly at the convent and cheered me up."

"Do you know what she went there for?"

"I said, to cheer me up. She is fond of having a quiet listener for her small talk."

"Do you know what she came here to me about this morning?"

Martha pretended complete unintelligence.

"She asked your hand for her son."

"Ah!" cried the girl, leaning forward.

"Of course I refused."

"Oh, why?" she queried, trembling with irritation more than surprise.

"Because Fernand is not to my mind a fit match."

"Not fit? What has he done?"

"Vile things!"

"I wonder you have him here, then," she returned, smartly.

"So do I!" added the count. "But, I dare say, it is from my being sorry for his mother, and, besides, his father was an old friend. I am a great deal more sorry, though, since my weakness in receiving him let you think he had any chance."

On both sides there was silence. Since her brother seemed resolved not to break it, the girl finally lifted her head and wished to hear what her suitor and intermediary had said on getting the refusal. Her brother repeated her intimation that the young couple were mutually inclined to one another. Martha smiled as if she acquiesced in the assertion, though her brother's cheek glowed and his eyes were full of more censure than had at any time fallen upon the girl.

"You do fancy you love that man?" he cried, indignantly.

"I have to love those that seem fond of me, since those whom I ask no better than to love show me the

cold shoulder!" she retorted, bitterly. "And, talking of cold shoulder, do you really expect me to pass all my life away upon the cold joints of Madame and Mdlle. Brissot, with the Pontferrands as the pickles?"

André, at another time, would have encouraged her attempt at jocularity with a hearty laugh. But he seemed to have forgotten how to laugh of late. He looked at her steadily until her smile in self-approval had faded away, and with tenderness told her that he thought of going on a long tour. Would she not like to accompany him and see the places off which the photographer could not entirely have rubbed the charm and novelty? She was not to be tempted, and set her teeth hard like a colt first turning obstinate at the bit.

"You mean that you will cherish your sentiments towards Fernand, though they can be but shallow, in spite of all I've said?"

"There's no proof of what you assert!" exclaimed she, petulantly.

The count started at this doubt of his word as compared with that of a de Thauzette; and, seeing she had made a false move, she hung her head a little sulking, and drawing in her lower lip.

"Did they teach you to distrust your kinsfolk at the convent school?"

"I have learnt to distrust everybody," she said, evasively.

"Except Fernand and his precious mother, it seems!"

"I expect you are premature in your complaints. A little longer, and I should have heard them, no doubt with greater fulness, from Mdlle. Brissot."

She was alarmed by the effect of the name upon her brother. It was as if, thinking in playfulness to fling a drop of water, she had dashed him with vitriol. Convulsed with wrath, it was only by a great effort that he mastered his tongue almost saying something most regrettable to one who was so little more than a child. He waited a few moments before speaking at all, and even then his tones were tremulous.

"Mdlle. Brissot," he observed, "has nothing to do with the matter. She has never spoken ill; when does she ever speak ill? She has said absolutely nothing of Madame de Thauzette and her son to me or you, I am certain; and that she will not allude to them I am no less certain."

Like the child again, the reckless creature uttered a galling exclamation.

"Why do you say, 'How surprising'?" demanded he, authoritatively.

She was rushing on her peril.

"Because," said she, without thinking—"because she has had M. de Thauzette's acquaintance long enough to know all about him!"

"Question her yourself, then!" he said, severely, turning his face away.

"It's useless—I know as much as I need."

"About him?"

"Ay, and about her too!"

"You'll have to explain that!" he thundered, advancing towards her as if he had forgotten their ties and meant to crush one who stung him so frequently and so venomously.

But, recovering his cooler wits, he stopped short. It was impossible that she should have discovered the enigma which baffled him. If this innocent maiden was also turned against the woman whom he adored and glorified, how could he believe her who better knew society? Did Martha, too, believe that Denise was unworthy of her companionship as one who had fallen, and who, arch-hypocrite, continued to assume the semblance of an angel and the demeanour of a princess?

In any case, it was clear that such a controversy would have to come to an end there and then, never to be resumed, or even recurred to. Vulgar loggerheads, to which their difference was degenerating, ill became brother and sister in their sphere.

"Martha," said he, gravely, "I know too well who set you against me and Mdlle. Brissot, whom I still consider your worthiest companion. If you

won't think so you two cannot remain under the same roof."

"Very well," remarked the heiress of Bardannes, coolly, "dismiss her."

"Dismiss one who has done nothing to deserve that sentence!" repeated the count. "Besides, faithful servants are not dismissed off-hand. She is the daughter of an honest and devoted man, to whom I owe great service, and of a housekeeper above censure. It was out of gratitude towards me at first, and then from affection for you, that she consented to give all her time to you, and she's been vilely repaid! If you will not have her intimacy and show her proper respect, you'll have to do the other thing!"

Martha bowed her head, overcome, as most people were, when André put his foot down firmly.

"I am not going to part with friends, whose absence would be my ruin and black injustice, just for a girlish whim! you've no foundation for your ill-humour and ingratitude."

"Ingratitude?" sneered she, as if she had found little foundation for that sentiment.

"Yes, ingratitude!" he reiterated. "As the attempt for us to live together fails—as you won't have Mdlle. Brissot's society—as you are set on marrying a fellow I judge beneath you, and since, particularly, you prove

that you must be looked after, back you go to the convent as you proposed."

She rose, but, tottering, caught at the high back of the chair. He was too deeply engaged in his theme to remember courtesy and fraternal feeling, and went on inveighing her.

"You will not long have to wait for coming of age, when, as I dare say this intermeddling Madame de Thauzette has told you, you will be free to throw yourself away. But till then it is my duty to prevent your misstep, for which you would suffer ever so long."

The girl interrupted with a forced and hysterical laugh.

"She's won her point!" she ejaculated; "she's won her point!"

He stared at her without a vestige of comprehension of her meaning, almost thinking she had gone mad at his unwonted severity.

"I mean that you love Mdlle. Brissot."

Ah! even to this guileless novice the inclination of his heart was apparent.

"And she very clearly divines as much!" went on Martha, salved for the pain inflicted on her by the view of the distress she imparted. "I mean also that she intends having your title in order not to be talked about like others, and that she is driving me out of the house before she is quite its ruler! All very good reasons

for me going back to the convent, I see, as soon as possible."

He stopped her at the door with an imperative gesture.

" You are forgetting we have company to-day," said he, with simplicity.

" To-morrow, then, at the earliest!" she cried, bounding out of the door not to see the cloud of sorrow thickening on his brow as he went to the table and, with an effort to steady his nerves, bent to write to the superior of her convent.

He was quite alone. His sister would love him no more, and Denise, he feared, covered indelible shame under that virginal mask. What he took for modesty was no more than watchfulness, lest she betrayed her blemish!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GUARDIAN OF THE HOME

MARTHA was not untouched by her brother's sadness on account of her, and more so than by his rebuke. She wandered about, quite undecided what to do. She hated to face any one ; it seemed to her that she would burst into tears if anybody spoke harshly to her soon again. Nothing entertained her ; the landscape presented no features for her to dwell upon, no book attracted her attention ; nothing in the way of entralling music flowed from her fingers when, in desperation of other solace, she sat at the Erard. She was afraid to question anybody about her suitor. The sounds betokening the Thauzettes' preparations for departure also died away. She feared that Fernand would be made to go without her speaking with him. She hastened to avoid this mischance by getting out a sheet of paper, folding it up into one of those curious shapes which school-girl affect, and beginning to indite a note of good cheer

"Through the vindictive cruelty of our elders, who have no sympathy with the young and loving hearts," etc., etc.

Suddenly she heard the glass doors of the great hall where she was writing open abruptly. She was about concealing the paper when, on looking up, she found it was only the very person she most wished to see.

"Oh, you! and I was writing to you!"

"Let's see," and he stepped forward smiling and showing his beautiful teeth.

But she put her hands behind her with it tightly held, like one school-girl hearing a mate a lesson and hiding the book.

"No, it's no use now we can speak."

"Don't destroy it," repeated he, glancing around distrustfully, for he had not the slightest desire to be interrupted either by the brother, more punctilious of honour than he, or by Brissot, whose behaviour during the ride clearly showed that he was a strict defender of this little beauty. "Some one may interrupt, and then you could pass it to me as we shook hands at good-bye. It would tell me what you hadn't time to say and be our first love token."

A first love token! she was not expert in these matters, but an emphasis in his speech instinctively warned her. She feared to give him what these confirmed conquerors always desire to secure—tangible

souvenirs. With a wilful smile, she tore the paper into strips, and then crosswise, and, over and above this contrariety, deliberately crossed the great room and tossed them into the fire. He bit his lip vexedly at this proof that the bird, though a mere fledgling, was not to be caught with facility.

"Hem! did you look at my respectful note of this morning?"

"You did?" he said, as she nodded. "Did it displease you?"

"You see the contrary, or I should not be here keeping the appointment you made."

"Why did you not at once take up the book containing the note?"

"To leave you time to think, sir. Perhaps you already regret your boldness in writing, and seeing I let the book remain, would like to get it back before anybody else found it."

"No! I'll run any risks for you!"

"So I sent Mdlle. Brissot for the book, with the idea that you would not have given it her with anything in it; she'd have found it."

"How so?" in surprise.

"She's always prying and peeping!"

"She's not the woman to invade seals," said Fernand, reluctantly but plainly, as if the tribute were wrung from him.

"A woman of all the virtues, according to my brother and you! Well, what she would not do in her duty as duenna she might from jealousy—"

"I don't understand."

"You used to love the saint!"

"I!" cried he, with a very hollow laugh at the nonsensical notion.

"Your mother told me so, and warned me against her. Your mother ought to know," the perverse little puss went on to say, with her reprehensible obstinacy.

"How would she know?"

"You did not hesitate to tell her you loved me, did you?"

"I had to tell her, because I could not see you as often as I wished, and she could freely go to the nunnery. Besides, I hope to have you for my wife, and such a thought never came into my head as regards Denise."

"Because she has no money?"

"How you talk! You seem bent on insulting me!" And he made a grand wheel round as if to march away indignantly.

She stopped him with a little crooking of her lifted finger. A count's daughter is accustomed innately to be obeyed on such slight signals.

"Stay! and tell me what really happened between you and Denise; I want to know!"

"Why," answered Fernand, getting his words out with as much deliberation as if he were a perjurer under cross-examination, "there was—nothing!"

"Nothing!" she ejaculated, with pretty incredulity; and then, with a sudden clouding of her eyes all asparkle—for she was kindly-hearted at the bottom—"there's a sorrow you left with her, naughty boy! If she cherished no sorrows but from respectable misfortune, why does she not laugh when sure of the present for herself and all those dear to her? She does not even smile like others of her age. It's no use your trying it on, as Nicholas says!"

"I say again, there was nothing but the silly romping of a boy and a girl brought up together, which leaves no memory when they have grown up. Just allude to that evanescent fancy, and hear how Denise will laugh!"

"It will be the first time I have that treat. But I'll content myself with this explanation, as I have no leisure for argument. I must return to the sisters to-morrow."

"No!"

"Yes! don't you know your mother asked my hand of my brother?"

Fernand expressed perfect ignorance.

"Can't say you did? oh, you story! That won't do, sir! Be careful, for I hate fibs! I believe I can over-

look everything but them!" she proceeded, with unwonted gravity.

She was brought up to leave servants to tell white lies, especially as they do it so well! "I am frank myself, very too much so, I am afraid, with you especially. Be frank towards me. If ever I were to find you false, no matter on what a petty point, I should go away from you for ever though I were your wife! My brother refuses his consent because you have done some ill deeds. How's that for truth?"

He bowed. But she was too deeply fascinated to believe that he had committed any high crimes, or even those first-class misdemeanours for which persons of position are sentenced to some months' incarceration one week and released the next.

"Without joking," said he, "I have fleeted my time away in evil company—squandered a fortune on cards, and run into debt, and know the duelling-ground. But all this is what fashionable men are bound to do before they meet their good angel, whom they are fated to love eternally! At this very time, some would say, I commit the greatest of all crimes—"

That made Gretchen cry, "Oh!" and start away as if Faust had changed into his inseparable companion and shown the cloven hoof. But he smiled at her absurd fright.

"My crime," went on he, "is one that your brother

would least forgive. Without any money to back my words, I am proposing marriage to a rich young lady whose lips are still warm with the bitter slur that I am not capable of disinterestedness."

"Had you loved Denise, you should have married her, though poor—or, rather, because she was poor. A married couple ought to share their money, that's simple justice. If you are only reproached for throwing money away, I am glad of it ; it proves you don't care for it, and I hate the dross myself. It shall never influence my mind, and my heart still less ! But I want to be sure that you have done nothing against honour and delicacy."

"Did your brother say I had ?"

She admitted as much.

"How can he say so ? He was my second when I fought a man who defamed me ! I cannot rest under such a stigma. I'll go have this out with him at once."

But he took particular care not to hasten whither the count might be met, but towards the gardens. He appeared glad enough when she checked him, too, with her little hand on his arm.

"In his present state, any words may turn into a quarrel. If my brother has any evidence against you, it will be shown me while we are kept apart, and I'll be my own judge upon that. If nothing arises for

which to blame you, I am resolved to be your wife, unless you have no patience to wait."

"You speak very strangely to me this time!" observed he, puzzled again, as now and then happened, at the tone of woman of the world which this child assumed quite naturally.

"After to-day," said she, quite sensibly, "we shall only speak before others, and cannot correspond. Your mother will be stopped calling, and no letter will pass. This is our last conference, therefore, till I reach my freedom. Take this," she proceeded :

It was a ring which she removed from her fine long finger, a mother's memento, which under no ordinary circumstances would have quitted her.

If anything important happened before Fernand left the château, he was to drop it into the drawer of the bureau in that room. She would look into it now and then. If she should find it, she would stroll down to the gravel path at the keepers' lodge. Thus they could meet without further arrangement and have a final interview. He smiled again at this evidence that she loved him dearly.

"So do I love you mightily! and I'll do anything to prove I am worthy of you. One little——;" but at the first attempt to draw her nearer him in an embrace become powerful, she was alarmed and slipped like a

needle through the circle, and placed three yards of air between them.

She put her hand up to her mouth, not wholly playfully, and cried :

“ Only at the altar, sir! ”

But if Fernand had the intention to follow up the attack, there was no time given them. Steps were heard by both, though light, and the young man, blowing the kiss to her which could not be hers lips to lips, hardly more than managed to slip out into the grounds before the new-comer appeared.

Martha had bounded over by the piano and snatched up a sheet of music at a chance.

It was Denise who came.

She swept the room with a quick, all-comprising eye, and much-comprehending glance, but said nothing, and did not even look towards the glass door which vibrated.

Martha did not know how to break this sinister silence. She fumbled the music in her trembling hands and watched Denise, who methodically straightened the papers on the table. Then she rang the bell, and, the man coming for orders, gave him some music to take to her room.

“ Tell Justine to pack them carefully,” said she, with her voice not steady yet, and, resenting the other’s calmness, she spitefully added, “ and particularly that —on the top—The Remorse of Gretchen ! ”

Not a movement on her hearer's part proved that what was a random shot—so cruel is innocence—had hit home. When the servant had gone, Denise turned calmly towards the young lady and said :

“I am waiting for your answer.”

“I did not know you spoke.”

“I wish to know why you were leaving us ?”

“Because my dear brother is kind enough to let me go back to my beloved convent.”

“Tired of home already ?”

Martha shook her head as much as to say that it was not the home that wearied her.

“What's going on to displease you ?” asked Denise, bluntly.

“I want to get away from being watched wher ever I go.”

“Who does watch you ?”

“You, for one,” was the sharp reply.

“How can you say so ?”

“When I sent you this morning for a book some where here——”

“When you desired me this morning to find a book which you pretended to have forgotten,” interrupted the governess, sternly.

“What do you mean ?”

“You can continue,” was all the word which her impertinent cry obtained from the other.

"While seeking the book, you met my brother. What did you tell him?"

"Only that you were excited, and surely I saw clearly. I added that you would not be safe in the saddle with only Madame de Thauzette and her son."

"Why not?"

"Because—well, it was not proper or prudent."

"Why neither?"

"That lady and her son are too dashing riders for a novice like you; so I suggested that my father, an old cavalryman, with a cool head, should go along."

"So I am obliged to you for being obliged to have him at my rein like a boy on a pet pony!"

"So that no harm should befall you; and nothing did arrive," she added, fervently.

Martha would have liked to change her note and forgive all, so impressed with devotion to her was this speech; but she had the saucebox stop on her, and continued as before.

"What is your name for that, if not watching?"

"I call it watchfulness."

"And I call it spying."

"If I were spying you, young lady, to employ your elegant expression, I should have quickly handed your brother the book which you had the impu——we'll say rashness, though, if you please, to send me for, though it concealed a letter from M. de Thauzette——"

"Did you break it open?"

"That were superfluous. It was enough to see who handed it to you. I know in what terms M. de Thauzette corresponds with guileless girls——"

"Judging by his to you?"

"Maybe so," rejoined Denise, with superhuman calmness.

"Do you confess——" began Martha.

"I have nothing to confess, least of all to you. You see I am answering you in your own key. You have repaid my ceaseless proofs of tender affection with insulting distrust. Yet," she pursued, gradually quitting her reserve, "not a thing gave you the right so to treat me, and I won't allow it! You do not see the interest others have to gull you; and your kindled fancy hatches up some romance where your heart is not entangled, but your happiness and dignity are. But I know it, I see the wreck impending, and I will not have it come! You were confided to me by your brother, to whom we owe everything, and as long as that is my sweet and holy charge, I'll do my duty! Within the hour of your quitting this house I shall go too, my task over. My father and mother will have to work again, I go to dressmaking in a garret, or even show myself on the stage, as Madame de Pontferrand says; but I shall not have helped to ruin you! on the contrary, I shall have done my best to save you. Yes, by all that is sacred, I

will save you, though I lose my life and even my reputation! God help you, lady!" were her parting words as she left **Martha de Bardannes** by herself.

The latter remained stupefied at the tremendous outburst which she had evoked from what she believed a dead volcano. Then, half laughing, half crying, in a fit of hysteria, she ran to her room, where she flung herself on the sofa, and burying her hot face, streaked with hotter tears, in the cushion, she moaned, as much comically as distressing :

"Oh! I am a bad lot to make everybody so unhappy!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ON A PERILOUS COAST

HAVING made up her mind to act very warily indeed—for a thundercloud seemed concentrating for a terrible outburst upon that apparently smiling scene—Madame de Thauzette left her room and perambulated the grounds and appurtenances in search of the housekeeper. But the latter was engaged instructing the not over-bright servant in the minutiae of the *menu*.

“Understand, Nicholas,” she was saying, in the great hall, “we seat eleven—let’s see: my lord, his sister, Madame de Thauzette and her son, M. Thouvenin, and all those Pontferrands.”

The man had ticked the names off on his fingers, and shaking his head perplexedly, returned:

“Beg pardon, ma’am, ~~only~~ eight I make it.”

“Me, too,” repeated Madame Brissot, herself puzzled.

“That’s ten——”

“Stupid! me too, t-o-o,” she repeated, to make it

clear at last, "meaning my family—my husband, my daughter, and myself."

"Ah, that *is* eleven, good measure. So you dine with my lord?" he went on, a little startled, being one of the ancient school of domestics who drew the line very rigidly when the aristocracy were concerned.

"Yes," replied the housekeeper, without comment, and crossing the room, "I'll attend to the wine myself."

"I was a fool to offend her," muttered Nicholas, downcast at this dread news, for he would not have an opportunity to decant the famous old port himself, and he retired to confabulate with the cook in sulkiness.

Madame Brissot was going too, but the lady in search spied her through the glass door, and signed to her. The beckoning was not regarded, and my lady was obliged to hurry in and unmistakably intercept her. The reserved air of the latter filled her with mistrust, and she received her excuses doubtfully.

"I have my head full of figures," said she.

"It strikes me that the figures of Fernand and myself are rubbed off your slate," returned Madame de Thauzette, with a smile, only partly in jest.

"You only imagine it. Your coming makes me additionally busy, that's all."

"But I want to speak with you," continued the other, as Madame Brissot persisted in trying to execute a

retreat. "Surely you cannot doubt my good intentions?"

It would have been unfair, after such a sample of it as her introducing Brissot to the count, and Brissot's wife bluntly said as much.

"I was a long time waiting for the chance to befriend you. And so I have made you happy?"

"As much as possible," was the answer, but the saddened face never lit up the brighter for all that assertion.

"Naturally, you pray it will last?"

"Such is my prayer, indeed! At any rate, the count seems very satisfied with Brissot."

"So he is—he's told me so himself."

"Then all is well?"

"In that quarter, yes."

The four words were uttered in so solemn and portentous a tone, coming from that lady of levity, too, that the hearer shuddered, in spite of always being on her guard against evincing emotion. She looked up inquiringly and wildly around her like the hunted deer in the glade for a moment taking breath.

"You do not seem to know what's going on! Has not the count told you?"

"What, what?" cried the housekeeper, more and more alarmed, for her master's manner had not forewarned her of this apparently grave disaster.

"Or his sister?"

Mdlle. Martha had not spoken either of anything out of the ordinary channel.

"Nor yet Denise? Really?" incredulously.

"Why should I speak you false?" cried the other, with indignation.

"You might have been bound over to secrecy."

"I assure you that I have heard nothing out of the common."

Her interlocutrix took a place on the sofa, calmly, gesticulated for her to approach so that she need not lift her voice dangerously, and proceeded:

"Let us speak freely, as we were wont to do when we kept nothing concealed."

Madame Brissot's calm face answered for her fairness in her part of the relation.

"The fact is," went on the lady, searchingly, "you bear me a grudge, of course, for this broken marriage."

"Not I! but go on about the business that brought you."

"This goes no farther, mind;" with a cautioning finger raised.

"As you please."

"Granting that you are happy enough, there is perhaps a greater joy in store for you all; and I believe I shall be the first to announce it—very likely, nobody knows it."

"What can she be driving at?" wondered the astounded hearer, who certainly did not show any joy.

"A small happiness is so rare a blessing that a great one alarms me; particularly as you make as much fuss—pardon my using plain words—as if you had to break bad news."

"Without any more fuss, then," returned the lady, sharply, "here you have it: your lord and master—the count, not your husband—he loves Denise!"

At this Madame Brissot did give a great start.

"How can you say that?" cried she in apprehension.

"He told me so. Why do you look frightened?"

"I am merely surprised that my lord should have selected you as messenger," answered the old soldier's wife, with that simplicity which often wounds more than finely studied-sarcasm.

Madame de Thauzette let it pass unnoticed by speech.

"I don't see why," she said; "my late husband and the count were like brothers."

"Monsieur de Thauzette? yes!—my lord looked up to him more like a father—but you? that's another thing. Knowing you as he does, and I knowing him as I do—I wonder that he did not choose anybody else!"

"Well, you do speak very plainly down here. The country air has made you boorish too! To con-

fess the exact truth, I was not entrusted with the news."

Her hearer smiled in relief, having guessed aright.

"It's a secret I captured," proceeded the fashionable dame; "but the fact remains the same. If he has not told any of you, it is because he is turning it over where and when the wedding will come off."

"He means to wed my daughter then? I was right to dread any increase of happiness."

Her features were clouded, something like tears sprang to her eyes, and she trembled with a kind of apprehension. The other looked at her in curiosity, unable to understand why the great accession of fortune thus affected her.

"How strange to see you quite overcome, much more sad than glad!" she said. "I recommend a bailiff to your lord, and he entrusts his lands and money to him;—in comes his family—you to rule his house, your daughter to teach his sister—then he falls in love with the girl and wants to make her mistress here. What have you got to worry about? what can you desire more? Admitting that fate was stern to you, now you have its ample, solid apology."

"But if my lord should be refused by Denise, who may not love him, in what a situation we should be!" remonstrated her hearer, almost weeping.

But the lady gave a little musical laugh.

"She refuse such a catch, though she did not love him? pooh, pooh! she will accept him, and make herself love him! don't you fear! A girl so poor and so intelligent as your Denise can always invent enough affection to satisfy a rich young gentleman who will make her a *millionnaire* and a countess!"

"But her first love may have filled up the gap in her heart where the second should be planted."

Madame de Thauzette winced, but again raised her laugh, though not so fluent and mellow.

"Her little flame—a mere flicker—with my boy, Fernand?"

"A mere flash for him, but such flames sear young girls deeply," returned the housekeeper, with more solemnity than the occasion seemed to demand.

"It's a thing of the past and has left things in the best condition. At that time Fernand was so light, frivolous, and rakish—you see I do not spare him—that he would have been the worst of young husbands—and Denise the most unhappy of wives, to say nothing of our having been embarrassed for money; then," she continued, with a sigh, "only less than at present. Where would we be if Fernand had made an alliance, I may say, a *mésalliance* of it with Denise? In some garret, without any fire in the dead of winter to apply any match to! Such remediless blunders are what one must avoid in life," said this La Rochefoucauld in Gainsborough

beaver and Langtry front, sententiously; "Griefs through love are always reparable, griefs of wedlock never. As a mother, you cannot compare a husband like Fernand with the count. Denise will snap at him, and Fernand will be dropped overboard, without any report to the new captain, as the master of George's yacht would have said, in the days when we kept a yacht. These Bluebeard cupboards are kept locked by all women. If we were silly enough to let a man peep in and see our former idols, he would instantly imagine we had a whole Walhalla somewhere else. Of course, when one is cornered and the confession is extorted, one must make the best of it! how it turns out depends on the kind of man one's dealing with. But all men are not born judges, most are born idiots! and they do not send everybody to execution every five minutes like the Queen in the fairy tales. But we are never going to see a girl now-a-days so simple as to run to a loving man who is ignorant and trustful, and shout out that she loved somebody else before he proposed. No, no! And, besides, there are others than Denise to be considered—"

"Who else?"

"Why, yourself, and myself, Brissot, Fernand, and Martha."

"Martha?" ejaculated the housekeeper.

"Have you no eyes? Not only does Fernand love

Martha, but she is 'soft' upon him. But the count will not hear of them marrying, and Denise—instead of shutting her eyes and seeing nothing—for it is no concern of hers—she must needs do all she can to drive poor Martha back into the nunnery ! If she is so unwise or so wicked as to tell the count how she went a-Maying with Nandy, her treatment of Martha will look to be jealousy, revenge, and spite ! Already Martha is exasperated against her, and there's been such a quarrel between them ! " rattled on this loose-tongued dame, relishing the very consternation with which she supersaturated the unfortunate victim of her torture.

" Only suppose that Denise, for any reason or none, rejects the coronet—how can she remain here after Martha returns to the convent ? It would be a full dish of scandalum magnum for the gossips—your Pontfer-rand kind—to entertain themselves upon ! "

" What would they say ? " queried poor Madame Brissot in this first juncture where a word could be inserted.

" That she was keeping the count's house, and he keeping her ! "

Madame Brissot, unable any longer to support this strain, sank, almost fell, into a chair, with the querulous cry of one hunted, always seeking and never finding unalloyed peace.

"Alas!" went on the lady, who had recovered the "second wind" of which she boasted, and ran on relentlessly as before, "the world is all tongue, and we cannot alter it. The only thing is to point the tongue at other victims—and we can do it if we combine our forces," said she with a sly look, and deepening her tone, "our interests are alike and ought to be in a common fund. You must not be downcast, but keep cool, and trim the vessel. The count loves Denise—marvellous chance! so stick to that—build upon it! Let Denise tear out that page of her diary, and open a new journal with him! Fernand and Martha are so fond—let Denise win over the brother to consent—'twere easy, for he will do anything she asks him."

Her listener made no remark upon the project, and so she was piqued.

"What do you want? Is Martha to be driven away alone—Fernand to be brought to task by the count—the count to fall out with one who has known him these dozen years? am I to be banished from this very house where I introduced you? is there to be wrath let loose, scandal scattered, misery for you three, and despair for the whole of us?"

Madame Brissot sat like the Sphynx. Her dialoguist sprang up and walked the room nervously, glancing at the impassive face now and again.

"All," cried she, "all because Denise will not hold

her tongue over what it is her interest to hush up ! May Satan—I beg your pardon, may Satin—reward whoever of malice aforethought spoils this feast that is cooked and will go on the table if only Denise will not upset the dinner-wagon ! ”

“ My friend,” began the housekeeper, speaking at last, “ I fully understand why you want none of us to tell Mdlle. Martha or her brother that Fernand broke his word to marry Denise. But you are right not to have his perjury dwelt upon. In all the count’s conduct nothing has betrayed the feeling you assign him, nothing in our conduct has sought to excite it,” she added, proudly. “ To seek more than the count has freely given us would have been ingratitude. Direct or indirect interference with his family matters—as well as any falsehood, if we are questioned—would be treachery.”

She rose with an effort, clinging to the back of the chair. She was stunned by the fierce conflict of emotion. Her head swam, and she saw not one in the room but a circle of Madame de Thauzettes whirling round and round her incessantly. Fortunately for her wits, she caught a glimpse of the count in the grounds, and she shook off her confusion. In her present state she dreaded to meet him. She might easily let out the dread secret which perpetually burdened her. Madame de Thauzette shrank from detaining one with so frenzied

and disconcerted a mien, and the housekeeper fled like a hare let out of the bag.

"What did she murmur?" queried the lady left alone; "she said something as she dashed away like one in blind madness. 'Come what may, her daughter would do her duty.' That may have been it. Duty! but what a nuisance these dutiful people are!"

She looked out into the gardens. The count was clearly bent on entering the house. She waited for him, ostensibly to take her leave of him, and he politely quickened his pace. She glanced into the mirror. She was pale with anxiety. Their colloquy would be an important matter.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LIE THAT GALLANTRY COMPELS

MADAME DE THAUZETTE, whatever her ingenuity and inability to see that she could be in the way, soon found that the house was too hot to hold her.

She heard that there had been some difference between her host and his sister, which she guessed sprang from her fruitless proposal to him. She tried to see Martha, but she was not to be intruded upon, thanks to an obstinate servant who could not understand cajolery or even bribery. It was worse than at the convent, where the Parisian had found no bar maintained against her. With these precautions and the cold air of the household, it was not easy to show the visitors the door more pointedly.

As soon as the young lady departed, Denise would naturally go with her parents. Whether Madame de Thauzette considered their fate or not, she need not have feared their fate at being thrown out of comfortable

situations. An old family like the Bardannes cling to one traditional rule: they pension all who honourably quit their service through no fault of theirs.

It is true that, just as Brissot had refused to be beholden to Colonel de Thauzette, he might refuse the count's generosity; that is, whilst he was alive, but money left by his will would be a different matter. Perhaps André did not yet steadfastly contemplate putting an end to a life deprived of motive without this engrossing sentiment for Denise. But, plunged into despair, he had those melancholy thoughts revert which flocked round him when he lost both parents a dozen years before. It seemed to him that the last of the Bardannes would be less wretched sleeping beside them in the family vault.

Whilst Madame de Thauzette was fretting in her rooms over the preparation for return to town, for the dinner was dismissed from her thoughts, the count was at his more fateful cogitation.

Though he believed that Fernand was full of vices and ripe for hanging, to put it mildly, he knew that maternal love would not let his mother see him in that sense. She deemed him talented and found every excuse for him when he indulged in an escapade. It was clear, too, that it was only her affection that made her assert him reformed, and perhaps, too, that he admired Martha for more than her fortune. Could she

have maligned Mdlle. Brissot out of mere pique? She might have a lingering grudge against him from the days when he, as a college youth, eyed her with sheepish adoration.

"Let me act, and act quickly," concluded Bardannes. "Before that young gentleman is off to town, I must have him confirm his mother's assertion that she spoke at random only." Before his mother, it would be impossible to have an explanation, as a quarrel in a lady's presence was not possible. Face to face, the outcome would be more free and decisive. If he wrongfully accused him, the count was the man to offer him frank excuses; and even, perchance, in compensation, the hand of the girl he sought.

He descended from the study, and was glad, before his anxiety was much lengthened, to spy the son of Madame de Thauzette on the terrace, shooting pebbles down the steps at the birds with his cane.

"Oh, count," exclaimed he, a little startled at the grave face and the black coat, buttoned up to the neck in a military manner, somewhat suggestive of a bearer of a challenge, "I wanted to say good-bye to you before we left."

"And I was looking for you to ask you to remain here while your mother's stay lasts. I have been conversing with her. I have had to say 'No' to her asking my sister's hand for you."

"I was not aware of my mother's step, but she told me the result," returned the young gentleman, keeping his eyes on his boot-toes.

"My sister's affection for you has decided her to marry you when she comes of age. I dare say you know that too?"

"I do," said the other, unable to repress a smile entirely.

"I am opposed to the union because your life is spotted blameably."

"You don't censure harder than I do."

So the young wolf with the meekest of voices.

"Your mother says you have reformed, however. Besides, who can claim he is reproachless? You would live praiseworthy if you began a wedded life?"

"I've determined so," exclaimed Fernand, delighted at the contrary wind not only ceasing, but another springing up so much in his favour.

"Would you do all that in your power lay to make the girl happy?"

"I would."

"Give me your hand, then," continued Bardannes, and the two clasped hands with a cordiality apparently alike on both sides.

"I shall remember nothing but that your father was almost a father to me, and that we two were college chums. I shall ask your mother's pardon for what I

have said against you," proceeded the count, who seemed to believe in his regrets being real and his resolutions unalterable. "I no longer gainsay your union with my sister."

"Is that so?" ejaculated the younger joyfully.
"Well, you are a jolly——"

"Stay," interrupted the count, more gravely than at first, "I have to crave that, as I caused my sister pain by the news of the refusal, I may acquaint her with this revocation in your favour."

Fernand remained stupefied at his good fortune.

"Now," went on the count, in a brisker but no less serious accent, "we are no longer mere friends, we are members of the same family; we must mutually guard and defend its honour."

Fernand, without divining the aim of this proposition, bowed assent, but with a growing fear that the drift was unfriendly.

"Well, now, I have owned to your mother that I love Mdlle. Brissot. Did she tell you so?"

"No!" answered the other wincing under the clear eyes too steadily fastened on him.

"Your mother spoke ill of that young lady—but she has withdrawn the compromising words. But where a woman's honour and fair fame are in debate, all must be clear! Don't you think so?"

"I must admit that."

“Your mother declares that she spoke at hazard, and that she knows nothing at all about Mdlle. Brissot except that she and you once were in tender relations. Your respect for your mother would not let you trumpet your conquests, of course—quite right. Hence this affair may have gone further than your mother dreams, as far as you alone know. Any fault of Mdlle. Brissot’s was shared with you. Your answer will be known to none but me—here’s my word of honour on that! Your mother, were she to know, would keep the secret as close as I, surely, for this is no common matter. Dishonour for some and death for others might befall. If Mdlle. Brissot was your mistress, that ends it—for,” he said proudly, “the son of Colonel de Thauzette cannot expect the son of the line of de Bardannes to take up with his leavings, I beg to believe. Things will go on their course. I have not spoken to Mdlle. Brissot warmly—I shall not do so. My sister, becoming your wife, will not go back to the convent, but set up housekeeping, and Mdlle. Brissot need not depart. Her father will remain my manager, and keep house with his wife and daughter as all along. None of them will be materially prejudiced. I shall travel or go for a soldier, as a tossed-up penny may decide. But if Mdlle. Brissot is guiltless;” he said, his voice breaking for an instant as he turned a sharp glance at heaven as if he prayed for this to be granted, “for which your statement will suffice me—I

shall ask her hand of her parents, and, she agreeing, we shall wed. Do you consent to answer me on this delicate point?"

Fernand drew a long breath, but would not speak. He moved his head in acquiescence.

"You loved Mdlle. Brissot?"

"I did—but like a boy of twenty—just because she was my playmate. She found it a matter of course to make me the confidant of those budding emotions which the boy took to be love. So cousins love one another in their teens."

"Thus, when you gave up calling at her father's, you had the right to do so. Thence you carried away no remorse, you left no shame?" proceeded the count in a deep voice, without betraying how he received the well-told falsehood, credulously or otherwise.

"Remorse?—no other remorse than my learning that Denise had taken seriously what soon blew over with me."

"That was all?—all! Upon your honour?"

"Upon mine honour!" cried the young man, uttering the denial fluently enough to convince any one but a jealous lover.

"'Tis well," said the noble, but not in relief himself. "Now, I have no more to do with anybody but the young lady and her parents."

It was a dismissal rather cutting than courteous. But there was an ominous fire in the speaker's eyes, and Fernand did not resent the tone. He recalled André's seconding him at his duel with Fulvières; one of the latter's friends had made an observation which the count had snapped up with the eagerness of a veritable war-dog.

Fernand slowly walked about without coming to any conclusion that set him at ease. He believed that the ruinous secret was sealed up in Denise's bosom, but after all, who can depend on a woman guarding even what destroys her if published? But it was with a smooth face, if not a smiling one, that he went in and interrupted his mother's superintendence of the travelling preparations. He told her what had occurred.

"And was that the truth you spoke?" she inquired, earnestly.

"The whole truth," bearing her scrutiny firmly.

A man who stood the scathing fusilade of a doubting and jealous rival was hardly likely to quail under that of a loving mother.

"I was frightened about your meeting," said she, fanning herself with her parasol fan briskly. "But I was a ninny!"

Fernand was silent. His life reposed on the breath of Denise Brissot. At a word she might convert her

father, to say nothing of her lover, into a bloodthirsty revenger, whom no prayers, no appeals, no excuses, could repel from his throat. He trembled, and all his sensations, as Thouvenin had presaged, paled before this quarter of an hour in apprehension.

CHAPTER XVI.

SAVING THE SISTER

MADAME BRISSOT, from the communication of Madame de Thauzette, could easily forecast what was in preparation. After a calm, which time had tolerably well preserved, the storm was about to descend and stir the but slightly ruffled lake to the depth of its bosom. Always a little daunted by her daughter, who was much her superior in intelligence and acquirements, she hesitated even now to consult with her on what would make or blight the whole family prospects. She had no other idea than conducting the problem with honesty, and yet the temptation was strong to keep the truth still entombed.

She had hardly been closeted with her in her own room than the servant came to inform her that their master had summoned her to join her husband in the library. She darted an inquisitive glance at Denise, but the latter, reflecting on the attachment of her young

charge and her betrayer, in no way replied to the ocular demand. She sighed, and traversed the house to the rendezvous.

Brissot had been given a chair, and he sat erect, without any hint as to what was impending to disturb his everyday imperturbability. The count had the air of the undertaker at a funeral, especially as he was in black, rather than of host for a dinner party. When Madame Brissot was seated next her husband Bardannes stood before them respectfully, not to say with affectionate reverence, and said :—

“ My dear Madame Brissot, I have a most peculiar matter to discuss with you two. In our long intimacy we have learnt all about one another. Since I lost my dear parents in you only have I met any one like them.”

This was uttered so unaffectedly that they could only bow, impressed and gratified.

“ To make you really occupy that position, the way has become easy—for I deeply love your daughter.”

If Madame Brissot manifested no surprise in her emotion, it was just the other way with her sterner half, who expressed enough for the pair.

André responded to the old soldier’s look with the remark that he was sure of what he advanced, for he had deeply reflected. With a profound bow, worthy of the heir of an old race, he added the sacramental phrase :

“The Count of Bardannes has the honour to ask her hand of you.”

“My girl Denise to become your wife, your lady? my lord!” exclaimed Brissot, amazed. “Why, how could that ever be?”

Madame Brissot hung her head a little. The count smiled deprecatingly.

“I do not see why not,” said he.

“But we are humble, not of your lordship’s quality.”

“You are honourable folk,” was the decided rejoinder to his remonstrance.

“But living in your house, in your service, people will say—that, that we ensnared you.”

“Am I a boy to be tricked and netted?” cried Bardannes, pleased in a way at a little opposition. “Do I not know what I am about? Am I not master of my actions? who can call me to account?”

“Moreover,” went on the bailiff, evasively, being a stubborn fellow of his sort, “I told your lordship this morning Denise was engaged——”

“She was engaged to Fernand, from whom, almost in his mother’s presence, I have most plain and solemn explanations relative to your daughter. My dear Brissot,” the count pursued, “your consent in no way trammels Mdlle. Denise. Hers is yet to be obtained by me. All I ask you now is

the leave to make known to her my hopes and feelings."

"Upon her, indeed, all does depend. For my part, my lord, what can you expect me to say save that I am made the most astonished of happy men? If I am an honourable fellow—as I have sought to be—if we are both trustworthy, as you say—you amply repay us for life's trials and sorrows!"

He shook a tear out of his eyes; Madame Brissot was silently weeping.

"Eh, Jeanne?"

"Tha-a-at's true, my dear," she answered with more of a sob than articulate speech.

"Then," cried the old soldier, with pretended roughness to hide his own display of the welling eyes of feeling, "what have you got to blubber about, old lady?"

"It's such an honour!" she faltered, "though Madame de Thauzette gave me some idea of its coming. She seemed to know your intention, my lord."

"You don't mean to say that you have already spoken to your daughter on that hint?" said the count.

"Well, Madame de Thauzette might be making a mistake."

"Did you sound your daughter on the subject?"

"I—I," began the poor woman, all in a fluster, as she would have said, "I was just going to talk to her in that vein when Nicholas called me away hither."

"Where is she?" inquired Brissot, at a loss what more he was expected to say.

"She is in my room. Brissot, go call her, and we will leave you together. It will be best, eh, Brissot? don't you think—for my lord to say what he has to say without anybody by. She's a timid soul, my lord, and she might not speak out when we were here, d'ye see? In any event, be well assured that we are ready to lay down our lives for your lordship!"

Weeping, she would have kissed the nobleman's hand, but he prevented that, and led her respectfully to the study door. Once she was outside she recovered some fortitude, and hurried her husband on.

"Let her decide her fate sharply," said she. "Run for I know what young people are!"

It was Brissot, therefore, who called his daughter out and told her of the count's desire to see her for once without witnesses.

Denise came into the count's presence without any more emotion than usual, however. Probably she still fancied that it was only the relations of Fernand with Martha which were to be discussed.

She looked very charming in her house dress. It was a prettily-draped greyish pink silk dress, with an open corsage, exhibiting a white *gorgerette*, or short pleated front, matching the cuffs, and its whole effect of ashes of roses, more or less a kind of mourning,

slightly relieved by rosy ribbons in knots and as armlets.

With all the lofty courtesy and steadiness of tone within his power André began the colloquy with the formal intimation that it was authorized by Mdlle. Brissot's parents.

"They allow me to tell you that I love you."

One rapid glance, like the flash of a diamond, and her eyes dropped again; she blushed and trembled like a leaf of the aspen in the restless zephyr on the hill-tops. The speaker's intonation was warmer, and she was sure that it came from the bottom of his heart.

Free as she knew she was left by those who loved her, she hesitated some time before her low yet firm reply that she was no stranger to the suit. It had not required her mother's perception to forewarn her. André had been even too scrupulously reserved as master of the house and she a dependent, but she felt that it was some deeper sentiment than mere respect that moved this true gentleman.

But for that one blot on her life, how proud as well as happy she would be now!

The count, drawing nearer, murmured gladly:

"Then you have loved me a little under the rose, eh?"

"If 'tis to love, to value and admire manly nobility and elevation, to rank one in mind and heart above all

others, to stand eager to offer him unrepaid all one's life—to die gladly that he might be spared one pang—if this be loving, my lord," said the girl, with strengthening voice, but one still tinged with incurable melancholy, "then do I love you, as never better was man loved before!"

He would have leaped that one step between, and enfolded her in his arms. But she warned him to forbear yet a moment. Spite of her unexplained restraint, the count was confident that her return in sentiment was stronger than sheer gratitude for his having lifted her up out of desperate misery, far from the scorn of the happy ones and the taunts of the malignant.

"You love me, you love me!" he kept repeating.

"Yes, indeed, I love you, and tell you so the sooner, at your request, because were I to die this day—for who knows what a day may bring forth?—my death, with such a secret, would be agony!"

"Thank God, I've won a wife!" cried he, this time taking the forward step.

But already she had receded two, muttering with a kind of terror, "Not in me, no!"

"Great heavens, no! why so?" he ejaculated, more astonished than offended at this second repulse, after her confession.

Alas! could she, after all, be—not one of those who

can love, but may not wed, but one of those who would not love because wedlock was impossible ?

She asked him for his hand with a heartrending gaze, through which, in grief-filled but not tearful eyes, he read a soul—a clouded pearl.

“ You know the truth now,” said she, retaining his hand, in which, somehow, he could not press hers, though it was as warm as his ; “ and so, let us turn away, only two friends, who may rely on one another.”

“ Friends ! ” he reiterated, bitterly puzzled. “ Am I to believe that you loved this Fernand ? ”

“ It must be so, since I do not believe I can marry another.”

“ You mean you love him still ? ”

“ God forbid ! ” returned the girl, with a gesture of disdain and disgust, as though she ground a reptile under her heel. That gave him a little balm. He went on ruefully :

“ If that love of yours counterbalances this love of mine, I can forgive you.”

“ Forgiveness ? ” she echoed, quickly ; “ there tolls the word that would for ever clash with our happiness if I were mad enough to believe it. That word would come again and still again, and quickly set us as far apart as before you approached me, and I came close also, so very eagerly ! But that is all your lordship shall have to forgive, for I am going——”

Until her turning away with such an incontestable evidence of her never retracing her steps—for he knew her to be steadfast—he had no estimate of what a loss would be there.

“Don’t go!” he said, rushing in between her and the door with a boyish impetuosity, “don’t go away, I beseech you! with plain friendship and plain gratitude, there is nothing dangerous or unseemly in your keeping my house with your mother and father.”

“Your sister leaves to-morrow. After this conversation, I have no grounds for remaining in her absence.”

She smiled faintly at his preposterous argument, which only a love-sick brain could have evolved.

“Martha does not depart, at least until she marries. Then I shall be going, and for a long, long while.”

“Your sister marries?” queried she, anticipating the answer and deplored it beforehand, too, as her accent showed.

He told her how he had indignantly rejected the proposition of Madame de Thauzette at the first. But what he pretended to be full credence in Fernand’s asseveration and in his promise to reform merely was, as she divined, a wish to be disengaged of “the little sister,” always a sort of King Charles’s head that persistently pops up in lovers’ colloquies.

“Your sister to marry M. de Thauzette?” she said, repeating the name as if each letter were drops of

concentrated aloe juice blistering her tongue. "Have you consented? what can have made you give way so far—so low—to that?"

"It comes your turn to forgive me. Oh, I loved you so dearly! As I was bound to know all about you, and he alone could tell me, I challenged him, with a pledge to let none, not you above all, know—before his mother, to swear that you—that he——"

"Speak out!" she interrupted, seeing that the direful instant had come for the plainest of speech and the straightest of deeds. "Ask if he was or was not to blame in our relations?"

"'Tis so. And as he called his honour to witness——"

"Villain! of course he forswore himself!" she cried.

Stupefied at this outburst from one whom he had grown to think incapable of one high note in the even tenor of her daily way, the count almost feared she was suddenly distracted.

"Forswore himself!" he said, in consternation. "Oh, think what you say!"

"Think what you do!" was her fiery retort. "To rob you of your sister, your fortune, and your happy life in dignified repose, he told you an impudent lie! no doubt such men rate that chivalric! Upon such falsehood is based the honour of blackguards who steal woman's honour! Now I will tell all!" she continued, heedless of the caution implied in his rapidly closing the door,

and speaking with fluency the pent-up sufferings of years.

So long as she alone had been concerned, their secret had been religiously guarded by herself and her mother. Out of love for her father, she could and did sacrifice herself. He had no more idea of her wickedness than this noblest of men before her, out of love and respect for whom she also would have abstained from one injurious word. But now the case was altered. Since André's sister was threatened, whom he entrusted to her, a pure innocent girl on whose purity and innocence Fernand would trade to make her rebellious to him and ungrateful to her governess, Denise lost not a moment in making a complete avowal that she had been the victim of the young Lovelace.

CHAPTER XVII.

FATHERS HAVE FLINTY HEARTS

DURING the distressful tale, spoken simply yet eloquent as a choice romancist's most admired page, the listener averted his eyes, but inclined his spell-bound though burning ear. He followed the sufferer on that deceptive journey South, saw her moaning at the cottage door, and on that sleep-walking roaming to the river.

Oh ! that I had been on the spot to save her, thought Bardannes, jealous that any other should hold this woman by a debt of gratitude. Indeed, he loved her still !

“ Yes, he cast me off, coward and scoundrel that he is ! ”

“ Not so loud, not so loud ! ” whispered the count, thinking of Brisset, so tender on points of honour.

“ Why should I hush it up now ? my life is ended after such a confession. If my father heard it, he

would kill me straight ! Much loss to me ! I wished he had four years ago—but, no ! I could not now save your sister ! thank God for that ! The villain, the mean cur ! it will be a pleasure to see the dog shown up to be worth hanging ! ” so she ran on, descending in her frenzy at having the gag removed, almost to a virulence unbecoming her.

But it is to be remembered that for four years she had been choked, so to say, and her poor mother and she had daily exchanged stolen glances. At the close of her story tears came to her relief, drowning her flame of indignation. She hid her burning face in her quivering hands, and sank into the nearest chair, sobbing as if to break her heart.

The lay-confessor who had received this charge, because it was not possible to break away or interrupt it, stood irresolute. At last, as her convulsive sobs lessened in violence, he returned from the window, whither he went for relief to his strained senses, and said :

“ I need not say that this secret is buried, with my heavy heart as the stone upon it.”

He need not have assured her of that ; but she unmasked her grief-stricken face, and ventured a timorous glance at him which expressed her thanks. Finding her voice manageable at last, the poor girl mustered up her flagging energies.

"But you do not know all," said she.

"Enough that I shall not hand over my sister to this villain," replied he. "But this something more——"

"Yes, the child——"

"Ay, what became of the child?"

It seemed to the tortured one that their final task was the supreme pain of all. On the other hand, if this unfortunate lover heard that, his anguish would be so great that he would love her less, and that would be so much the better for both, perhaps.

The recital of the modest funeral, with only the two female mourners after the tiny coffin, made André weep with the relater. She made him a kindly gesture of thanks. Together with her mother, this was the sole person who had shared in her sorrow. It seemed a new tie between them to replace that which she believed for ever broken.

She snatched his hand, and clung to it with a kiss. She wished she could die ere it must come to an end.

Suddenly she felt the hand turn cold under her lips. She looked up with a sensation of coming woe, even more poignant than those she had spoken of. Indeed, the door-square enframed the irate visage and fury-filled form of Brissot.

He was strangling with rage. His grey moustache and goatee bristled like that of the god Pan at an invasion of his groves. The old soldier had heard but little of

the avowal, for his was not the eavesdropper's nature. But a little was enough to make him understand what a dreadful secret had been nourished on his hearth. This pride of his home was a cowardly deceiver, not merely to him, but to everybody around her for months upon months, to all the good and trusting folk she met. When he gave her a kiss before going to work in the morning, he was kissing a sullied brow; when nightly he wished her pleasant dreams, she went to dream of her lover! ignoble, worthless.

He advanced so threateningly upon the group that André was temporarily paralyzed by this apparition of Nemesis in a new character.

Denise sprang up, but had not the strength to flee. André encircled her in his arms, supporting her and shielding her with the one same action. At this Brissot's wrath passed the containable point. All respect for the gentleman whom he loved sincerely was hurled to the winds. He flung himself forward as if he were shot from a mortar, and seemed about to tear the girl from her refuge and dash her beneath his feet.

"Out of that place and be off with you!" thundered he.

Denise slid from the count's embrace and sank in a heap at the exasperated old man's feet, moaning, "Father, father!" in a voice that would have melted any heart but his flinty one.

"Drab, away!" he cried, but at the reproachful look of André he did not spurn her.

She rose to her feet and staggered towards the window like a blinded bird fluttering against that side of the cage next the window.

"Where are you going?" demanded the count, steadying her, and in some measure directing her to the door. She passed out. The count stood there, determined that she should not be followed and dealt with by her father in his unreasonable mood.

But already another idea had stirred him, due to a life passed in submission to order and authority. He hung his white head, and quite in a changed voice said: "I must ask your lordship's very kind and gracious pardon for having brought into the house such disreputable people as we are. But I had no idea of it. Perhaps you will not mind seeing her to her mother, for I don't want to do her any harm *here*. I will put my books in order before I leave. Take her away, my lord, quick, before my rage gets the upper hand of me!"

The nobleman hastened out after the girl.

When Brissot was left alone he fought with an insane impulse to seize anything in the shape of a club and smash all the objects within his reach. The bright sunlight maddened him for not having a cloud; it seemed the immense smile of some vast and evil spirit which mocked at the calamity so all-important to him. He

stood at the window and pressed his throbbing forehead against the glass.

Had he spied any one in the grounds below to give a target for his fury, calmed as boiling oil may be calmed by a drop of coldness, but still scorching, he would have leaped down twenty feet and not heeded the distance. He turned away.

"I must leave my accounts in order," muttered he. "Yes, I promised my good lord that. After my books are returned and approved, I will punish the wrong-doers."

With a step suddenly firm as on parade, he went through the house to his office. Sustaining his effort to govern his seething brain, he gathered the papers, journal and account books required, and slowly began to retrace his way to the study.

In the great hall some one was entering from the garden stealthily as a thief. Instinctively he halted. He had no desire to display to strangers his countenance, red with suppressed fire, streaked with scalding tears, such as the brave, honest veteran had almost never known.

The intruder was Fernand. Whistling to himself a hunting song, he came over to the burean which Mdlle. de Bardannes had designated as being the receptacle of the ring—the lovers' signal box, in a word—and opened the drawer. At that moment he heard an unguarded step.

Brissot appeared, and all his choler blazed up anew.

Surprised in the but little reprehensible action, the young man none the less showed the pallor of a detected criminal.

"It is you!" stammered Brissot, petrified at his prayer for vengeance being so swiftly answered.

"Yes," replied Fernand, who could not comprehend why those eyes should be fastened on him with the consuming fire of a tiger's. "Only I."

"What do you seek here?" demanded Brissot, savagely, and creeping up like a red Indian wishful to make sure of being well within dagger-stroke.

"I? well, come to that, old Honesty, what do you want?" queried Fernand, assuming a playfulness which he could not fail to confess inwardly was foreign to his growing alarm.

Undoubtedly, Brissot had gone mad, he thought. And he was all too sure of that when, with a howl: "Your life, villain!" the ex-soldier leaped upon him and flung his arms around him so as to pin him to his side and continue the crushing movement.

"Villain, I say again! you ruined my daughter, and you let her child perish at the baby-farmer's! You stole away from her arms, did you? get out of mine alive if you can!"

A terrible wrestling took place between the pair. What Brissot lacked in youthfulness was compensated

in him by his fire of eumity and determination to punish. The sufferings of his daughter and his wife during four years invigorated his old blood, stiffened his jaded nerves, renewed his overworked muscles. Fernand could no more wriggle out of that hug than a calf from the countless coils of the boa constrictor. He was flung like a mere bundle upon the lounge, and, with a hand which he suddenly freed, the victor commenced with a slow and fiendish gusto to throttle him.

He still writhed, but he owned to himself that his was a doom pronounced irrevocable. But yet he appealed, not to the mercifulness no longer existent in the captain's bosom, but to his sense of fair play.

"You—you—ugh!" gasped he, "you give me no chance to make a fight of it. You are m—m—murdering me!"

Murder!

'Tis an awful word for a soldier to hear applied to him. Spite of his righteous indignation, Brissot relaxed the fingers at his throat, and, as he might have handled a child, pulled him upon his feet with the other hand.

"Right," said he, sullenly.

Then, a new thought striking him, he believed that he was leaving his vengeance incomplete. He let go of his prey altogether with blighting contempt, and gave him a push.

"Now," said he, with a terrible voice, "you go

straight to that mother of yours, and tell her that I give her one hour to come and ask me for my daughter's hand for marriage with you. If she does not come in one hour, I'll take this up where I left off. Go!"

He followed him up to the glass door. Although he stopped short there, reliant on the efficacy of his threat, Fernand, as he hurried off to the part of the park where he knew his mother was strolling to pacify her nerves, fancied he was pursued closely and unremittingly by the avenger of Denise.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHILST AWAITING THE WIDOW

BRISSOT had gone to confer with his wife, and very greatly astonished was he that she did not agree with him in his furious sentiments, and even try to throw oil on the flame.

The old soldier was not skilled above other men at the indecipherable puzzle, woman's heart. It is, perhaps, because we are unable to sacrifice ourselves utterly for anybody that we rate it a crime for any one to give away everything for another.

Besides, Madame Brissot was one of those European heathens who esteem themselves Christians because, believing in predestinarianism, they call Fate "Providence." She reasoned that, anyway, what was done was over—if Providence had not so willed it, it would not have happened.

She seemed even to be not too pained upon the relief of the secret being disclosed to him. It was time he was

suffering now, but Denise and her mother had writhed under the same affliction during nearly five years. There was some gain, no doubt, in removing this ache from the brain, and this burden off the heart. Often they had nearly broken down under them.

"What would you have had me do?" demanded she.

"Your duty!—tell the head of the family the truth, as he is responsible for all."

"I learnt the secret from her, and I had no right to betray it."

"You would rather both deceive me," he thundered striding up and down with irritation as well at being drawn into a discussion, and at Madame de Thauzette being so tardy in acting upon his nowise seductive invitation per Fernand.

"Denise," continued his wife in a pleading tone whether she had much hope of softening him or not, "Denise was not afraid of your anger. It was your grief that she loved you too well to excite. She hoped you would never learn the shame. We could not tell what you might do."

"That was none of your business," returned he, though self-acknowledging that he was in no mood to be trusted alone with the objects of his anger.

The French husband is a rather placid, "let things slide" partisan, in the general run of things, but when

the family honour is menaced he not only constitutes himself sole judge, but likewise the merciless executioner.

“She would have died rather than reveal it to you.”

“And the best thing too !”

“Oh, Brissot, how can you !” cried she, weeping at the unwonted brutality.

“Don’t you think that I would sooner mourn for her than curse her ?”

“It’s the man that’s guilty, not she,” she uttered.

“No,” he answered, severely ; “she’s the one, thrice guilty. His name was already dishonoured, and neither his father, mother, nor himself thought decently of him. So he was not cheating the affectionate trust of honourable parents like us. He was continuing the gallop of his race in vices ; idling away his time in immorality—an unscrupulous libertine, for whom those fashionable monkeys find loads of excuses, and for whom the devils below will find loads of white hot coal. Burn it all, speak no more of her, unless you have something else to say than silly excuses.”

Madame Brissot was silent for a time, the dreadful future was the stunning blow to her now. She had for a moment believed that she had drained the bitterness to the dregs ; but no, there was more at her lips. Nevertheless, she was in the habit of regarding her mate as the master, and obeying any law he laid down.

If the fresh task were too great, they would die under it, and that would end the trouble. Looking back on the life they had led of late, that would be a blessing.

After the pause, during which the old cavalier champed his moustache, she timidly inquired:

“ Husband, do you still wish Denise to marry that man ? ”

“ Let me catch her refusing ! ” cried the exasperated man.

“ Well, well,” to calm him, “ have I not told you she is ready ; we are ready for anything ? but it will make her even more miserable.”

“ So much the worse for picking him out ! ”

“ She hates the man, and despises him ! ”

Brissot was taken aback by this remark. If this were so, how could she ever have been smitten ? Oh, the ways of women ! there is no seeing to the end of them.

“ Ah, Jean, you are a fortunate man to have done so little wrong as to justify your harshness, even to your daughter. I have nothing to blame myself for, thank goodness. What you are racked by only half an hour, has tortured me for years—yet I still have pity for her, and should show it to others too.”

“ Look here ! ” interrupted Brissot, the more violently as, being the softest-hearted fellow in the world under ordinary circumstances, the appeal to his pity affected him even now. “ All I know, and want to know, is that

a rascal has disgraced a young woman, and she cannot be righted unless he marries her."

The good woman could only murmur that her daughter might go away to some quiet place, remembering the retreat in the South where the babe of shame was born.

The other shook his head. Where is there a desert where, Mary Magdalene being in prayer remotely, some man does not spy her out, and journey to see if she remains as lovely in her abundant golden locks as the legends depicted her? For that matter, where is there such a sanctuary as an honest man's home? And yet Fernand had violated their home!

The remembrance of Mdlle. de Bardannes, fresh from the convent, suggested to Madame Brissot the same retreat for Denise.

"A nunnery!" reiterated he, with the French soldier's scorn for things clerical, "while at the same time he would be free to make other victims, marry and deceive some one into loving him, and all the world into respecting him! He must be punished, too! They forged their chain at their own good pleasure—by heaven, they shall wear it together!" with a furious dashing of his fist on the table.

"But," still remonstrated the fallen angel's advocate, with unfailing energy if not very subtle pleading, "if you only know everything, you must know that she

has acted on the most noble generosity, so that our benefactor's sister should not be tied to that scoundrel. She has behaved grandly, though her mother says it. She might have held her tongue, let Martha wed Fernand, and wed my lord herself. You would have had no idea you ought not to give her your blessing."

"What an idea!" said he, amazed at her entertaining it. "So, after having trifled with her honour and ours, would she have robbed the man of honour to whom we owe all? She has done quite enough to remain beside his sister."

"It's fortunate she did, to save her."

"I am going to tell you my mind now," said he, afraid to listen any longer, and hoping to strengthen himself in his purpose by the sound of his own voice. "You want her to keep single because the count loves her, and you assured her that the count would be grand and generous enough, mad enough, to marry her in spite of everything. That is your fancy. Well, I am the man that won't have it," he said, bringing down his fist again, and his foot too, in a way that would have sent up the dust if his wife were not too scrupulous a housewife to allow of its nestling anywhere.

"You are blaming me now, Jean," said she. "You forget the main point. She's an affectionate child—that's the cause of all this dreadful sorrow. But how could it be helped when she loved so dearly?"

"That's one of your woman's reasons! If she loved, that settles it!" he sneered. "Hang it all! we men love dearly, but we—I did, didn't I? If I had been such a scamp as to have wanted you to live with me without any marriage lines, what would have been your answer, come?"

"Loving you as I did, Jean, I should have acted like her."

"The Lord hears you!" said Brissot, solemnly, as soon as he could get out a word after this startling simple outcome of all-ruling love. "No, no! that's only to show how far a mother will go to excuse her child! But, as we were saying, or rather, as I was going to say, I will never repay all the benefits I have received with my complicity in any such a base calculation. If we men do not understand women's hearts, you women do not understand men's honour. I don't believe in making innocent people pay for the faults of the guilty. By all that's holy, she shall marry her lover! and if my lord's going to marry, let him marry some honourable lady—he deserves nothing less."

It was his ultimatum. He strode out, bent on going to find Madame de Thauzette and her hopeful in case they would not come to him. Madame Brissot sighed heavily, but, calming her features as much as possible, went to condole with her daughter. Beside her maternal heart the father's seemed but an apology for one.

To the renewed choler of ex-Captain Brissot neither of the two guests was discoverable in the house or grounds.

Thouvenin, also, was missing, by the way.

"If that young jackal has tried to escape me by slinking away," he muttered, "I will follow him to the world's end!"

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW THE WIDOW'S FLIGHT CAME TO BE REVERSED

WHILST this tragedy was taking place in the château of the count what might be called a serio-comedy was being enacted at the dwelling of Pontferrand. News flies about swiftly in a country place. Nicholas had imparted the intelligence that something very surprising would probably make the dinner a *fiasco*.

And his confidants so soon spread about the disappointment that it came to the ears of Justine. Justine was the trusted maid of Madame Pontferrand.

She was an old maid of fifty, with waxen face, cold, grave, and not very talkative for a woman. She was attached to her mistress like a watch-dog to its kennel though the chain was rather electro-plate than silver. For a long while her master's proceedings had appeared as dubious to her as to Madame. She did not require the latter's urging to keep a remarkably sharp watch. With this invisible spy at the heels of poor "Ponty," his

movements were daily recorded. Justine soon came to the conclusion that the twice-married man was deceiving his second "victim."

Meanwhile he was very smiling ; but then he had no more troublesome question to perplex him than what cravat he should wear at the dinner.

Nevertheless, a terrible storm was about to burst around his ears.

Justine had been over to the railway station, and, lingering there in confabulation with an old dame who served occasional cups of coffee to lady passengers indisposed after passing through the Longuebranche Tunnel, she waylaid the telegraph clerk. Entrenched behind official obtuseness, he was non-committal. Still, our lady's maid was a fine blade, and he fared no better than if he were in the clutches of a Grand Inquisitor.

She thus discovered much more than she had expected, returning home a prey to extreme agitation. She trotted feverishly, at a gait quite new to her, and was both pale and gloomy. The cook and the scullery maid caught sight of her approaching, but neither dared to address a word to her.

"What on earth can be the matter ?" demanded they ; "she smiles as if she had good news, but the spiteful leer in the corner of her eye means mischief for somebody."

As she went through the house she had to pass her

master's dressing-room door, and, it being ajar, his careless whistling of some tune pretty fresh from the Paris music-halls caused her to scowl and her eyes to flash.

She hissed between her grinding teeth, "Oh, you naughty man!" and continued her way, repeating, "Naughty, naughty, naughty!" as if her offended modesty, indignation, and her sympathy with her poor betrayed mistress could find no other words.

She was not unlike her mistress in temperament. She rather delighted in the avalanche she was going to push upon Pontferrand. As for any real pain that she would give her dear mistress, she doubted that Madame Pontferrand could any more be hurt by a blow not so sharp as to pierce her than the leathery cuttle-fish itself.

Madame de Pontferrand was not in the best of moods. After a very little inquiry, she was confident enough that Madame de Thauzette had not come away from town, however hurriedly, without something brilliant, and, worse than that in the country, something novel in the way of dinner dresses. So she was passing in review all her wardrobe with a more and more mournful misgiving as each thing looked faded, old-fashioned, and irretrievably dowdy. She turned anything but a welcoming eye upon her intruder.

"You are a pretty one," said she sharply, "to leave me to myself at such a critical moment. There is not

a fraction of time to spare, for somehow or other this dress must be made to pass muster under those odiously keen eyes ; and yet I don't see how we shall ever do it unless we 'dodge' up a new improver, and transfer all the trimmings from that *manne* which I wore at the county ball."

"My poor dear lady," said Justine, in the deepest tones of her shrill voice, "it is not a question of trimmings and of dresses now, alas ! but of a monstrous misfortune—the greatest that could fall on this unlucky house, and on you, my best of mistresses !"

At this surprise, the old lady turned green with pallor, and her eyes opened immeasurably wide, full of disquietude, upon the other's sour face. "Oh, goodness," exclaimed she, clasping her bony hands, "don't you tell me that Clarisse has run away with that handsome young man over at the count's, who looked like a circus ring-master !"

"Ever so much worse than that," replied Justine, feeling some consolation in a shock which in itself must pretty well have repaid her for a good many digs that the amiable consort of Pontferrand had delighted in giving her.

"It is a frightful thing that I am bound to reveal to you, and I entreat you to show that fortitude which I have always seen in you when only others were concerned."

Her hearer fairly quivered with anxiety,

"Tell me, tell me, what is this misfortune. I have not the least doubt that it is that abominable husband of mine. The gardener has not caught him cutting into my flower bed in order to send a bouquet to that pyramid of coquetry, has he ? the Parisian beauty, as they call her over there, though, for my part, except that she makes up her eyes very skilfully, I see nothing noticeable in her."

"Still worse than that, madame !" said Justine, sadly wagging her head ; "I am almost afraid that I have not the courage to tell you."

"Justine, I must insist upon your speaking out !"

In a slow voice, letting her words fall like a vivisectionist experimenting with drops of acid, the old Abigail responded :

"M. Pontferrand is behaving wickedly ; he is deceiving madame !"

Her hearer drew back as if she were going to go off in a faint ; but she remembered, if she did not see, that she was half surrounded in the rear by band-boxes, bonnet-cases, and dresses, and she bore up bravely against the revelation. It was not exactly unexpected. This time, though, she was sure, from her old companion's manner, that she was not playing echo to mere tittle-tattle, but bearing a substantial accusation. Nevertheless, while Pontferrand was capable of nibbling at treachery, she did not like to admit that he stood

in so little fear of her as to perpetrate a feast on the entire cake.

“Be careful what you are about, Justine ! If you have only discovered a mare’s nest, and he gets the laugh on me, I shall never be able to say a bitter word to him again ; and what a frightful fate would be mine, to sit mum-chance whilst he was prancing and capering about like the Don Juan of more than middle age that I am aware he is.”

The maid uttered a sigh as if she were bringing up her heart from its roots to vouch for her fidelity.

“If my good mistress believes that it is not my place to speak against my superiors, even when they are wicked, perhaps you had better give me my month’s money and send me packing ; but if, on the contrary, it is granted that I am only accomplishing my duty, however painful”—here she exhaled another crocodile’s sob—“I, I should like to be heard out.”

“Oh, I am listening to you ; speak, speak !”

“M. Pontferrand has been telegraphing to Paris. But that is nothing, you will say : master is always telegraphing to Paris.”

“Ay, and to some vile minx there, I’ll be bound.”

“But what do you think of this, mistress ? the vile minx, without waiting for his telegram this time, is coming here, right into our virtuous village, and I don’t know”—here she interrupted herself, or, rather, she

was interrupted, by the howl of joy from the railway-engine bursting out of Longuebranche Tunnel, and approaching Bardannesville, whereupon she continued : "There ! I should not wonder if she was looking out of the window of one of those carriages at this very moment."

"Oh, I fully believe you ! He is a wretch !" screamed Madame Pontferrand, slowly sinking down, with a good deal of caution for a woman under such a blow, upon the nearest chair least encumbered, from which she pushed the dresses intended in combination to create one for the dinner. On recovering from the shock with that new vigour which the prospect of revenge gives to such natures, the mistress of Justine put on any garments that came handiest to her and at the same time were best adapted for disguise. Almost dragging the maid with her, so headlong was her action, she proceeded towards the railway. As far as the spy had ascertained, the visitress from Paris was too astute to come to this way-station of the loop-line itself. She was going to make her stop at Val-en-Creuse, which was just this side of the Longuebranche Tunnel.

About this same time Fernand had horrified his mother with the communication of Brissot's invitation, which was equally a threat. Their consultation came rapidly to an end. To neither was the idea of such a forced alliance at all acceptable ; and to both the same

idea of flight occurred. Theirs was the nature to take refuge in evasion and crooked ways the moment that trouble presented itself. Fernand turned over the time-table, and, after entangling themselves in its hieroglyphics, they cut the Gordian knot by agreeing to meet at the station of Val-en-Creuse as soon as possible, the first arrived to wait for the other, and both to wait for the first train for Paris. Fernand, as became the man, was to stroll away to the nearest point where he could get a horse, and ride around by a detour sufficiently wide to elude suspicion, whilst his mother went as straight as she could go there on foot.

Leaving the former to fulfil his branch of the task, we will politely follow the lady. Having only had a glimpse of the country, and meeting more than usual obtuse boys to open the gates, she was most amusingly misled.

Long before she arrived at the station Madame Pontferrand and her attendant were in the neighbourhood, posted in wait for every new-comer. To add to the embroilie, the worthy Pontferrand had pitched upon a necktie which so harmonised with his complexion that it set him off, he thought, to more advantage than he remembered these fifteen years at least. The silence of the house made him believe that his good wife was enjoying a siesta with a religious newspaper and a cup of tea. He, therefore, donned his best hat, dabbed his

nose with pearl powder, put a drop of atrophine in the tail of each of his eyes to counteract a certain dimness of vision which had attacked the old beau of late, and descended the stairs on tiptoe. Reaching the outer air, he glanced up over his shoulder, and felt all the jollier because there was no sharp eye at the window. He merely intended to have a guileless stroll and a bit of a chat here and there. But he had not gone many steps when the telegraphic clerk, who was off duty, came running up to him. He did not, of course, like to own that Justine had pumped him. Accordingly he did not mention her in any way ; he simply informed this almost best customer of his, of his having a message for him. With a slight start and an involuntary look back towards his house, although it was out of sight, he drew the man to the roadside under the poplars, and only then took the paper. As he read it, he commenced to smile, but then a frown appeared above it, and at the last line his face presented the Comic and the Tragic Mask combined, half and half horizontally. He looked alarm as far as his eyes were concerned, while about his mouth a smile continued to cling.

"This is a ticklish situation," he said, "what shall I do, Eusèbe? there is a f-f-friend of mine coming down here from Paris. Of course *you* know that, as you wrote this precious scrawl, and quite uninvited I assure you ! You need not wink ! I would not for the world have had

her drop into Bardannesville. What on earth shall I do, old fellow?"

The disciple of Franklin, Volta, and Edison ventured to suggest that as Madame Pontferrand might walk over to their station at any moment with a view of picking up the news, and as she would be sure to give particular attention, whether she had suspicions or not, to any lady passenger, possibly young—Pontferrand said, "so-so"—and probably good-looking—Pontferrand smiled fatuously and murmured "rather!"—and dressed in no rustic style—Pontferrand was here heard to say that he had often had to reprove her for being such a "dasher!"—well, to sum up, the son of the Telegraph volunteered to go back with him and execute the simple little favour of saving him in this dilemma. He would telegraph to the Tunnel Station, where trains always made a halt before plunging into the darkened tube, and the guard would give the lady secret notice that her welcomer would be waiting for her at Val-en-Creuse.

The lightened Pontferrand hailed this suggestion as a manœuvre of genius. He trotted into the buffet at once, where the clerk joined him, with the assurance that he had made all snug. The two made themselves snug in a retired compartment of the refreshment bar, where they smoked a couple of cigars to make themselves dry, allayed the dryness with a bottle of rare wine, and then each went his road with another cigar

alight, and all at Pontferrand's expense. The clerk went home to have a sleep ; the *bourgeois* to walk along the road that now approached and now departed from the line of the railway, and shone in the sun like four or six silvery snakes. By the time that our Lothario had left his native place well behind him he began to feel his spirits spring up like the innumerable hop-toads that sprinkled the hollows as if they had been rained down from the sky.

After all, there was nothing reprehensible in his present proceeding if you really looked at it in the right light. He was not going to a love-tryst of his own making. It was that rash-head in the capital who was flying down upon him without warning. Luckily she would not be seen in the village, where her presence must have excited comment. He would join her in a spot where the few who knew him would only laugh and poke at him in fun for six months afterwards when they met, for a joke of this kind has long life in these parts.

He would give his sweet charmer the bank note that no doubt she came in quest of for a new hat, a fan, or even to pay that *terme* in arrears which is the Parisian bogey. Then they would shake hands ; he would see her into the railway carriage ; go in the reverse way, and there would not be the least occasion for him to face the dragon at home with a quailing heart.

Thus comforting himself, the beautiful breeze aiding, he walked along the slope of the railway-cutting to the platform of Val-en-Creuse.

It was one of those timber walks peculiar to some country stations, evidently constructed by a railway engineer who had novel ideas of fun ; such a designer thinks that by stretching out the alighting platform almost to meet "the crack of doom," a very good joke is being played upon the stranger who flounders out at the extreme end on a wet night, when the blinding rain is blown from at least three points of the compass, and the station itself is almost as far off with its partly eclipsed lights as the signal box down yonder towards the tunnel.

Pontferrand felt his heart jump, for clear out of the station, upon the wooden way, paced a female figure evidently filled with impatience.

Had she already arrived ? The figure goes for nothing to an old lady-killer like him in these days when inventors do not neglect originating appliances to remedy natural defects and even improve upon nature.

From the fashion-plate point of view perfection is common enough everywhere save at Bardannesville, where the old fogies still object to the trickeries of the toilet. In this case Pontferrand thought he recognised the figure, and he was quite certain that the apparel had not come from the silk mercer's in their market town.

"It is my Parisian," he said to himself. "Eusèbe has worked the oracle beautiful. These fellows juggle with railway trains as I never could with three oranges after dinner; and to think of my charmer being so impatient! to come to think of it soberly"—rather a difficulty, by the way, since the red wine rose into the head during the long sunny walk—"it is a great compliment to me that she could not wait for my coming up. Instead of giving her one hundred and twenty-five francs as I intended, she shall have two hundred and fifty. In fact, looking at that costume she has got on, she is a miracle of economy to dress up to the mark on so little."

So reasoning, he did not bother going through the station, but walked round by the end of the store-houses and mounted the platform. It was thanks to this roundabout course he was not seen so far by his wife and her attendant ensconced in the ladies' waiting-room of the straggling building; however, one of them, venturing out, descried him half-way along towards the solitary female, whom we will have guessed to be Madame de Thauzette in anxiety at the delay in Fernand's arrival. Hearing a man's quick step on the planks, she turned delightedly with a sudden smile of alleviation.

Pontferrand bounded forward.

Under the lady's veil all that he discerned was

a flash of bright eyes—brighter than his own, or he would not have so blundered—and the smile aforementioned.

At the same time, fifty yards away, Justine was screaming for her mistress to rush out of the waiting-room and catch the faithless one actually accosting “the lady fair from Wicked Paris.” The two women, as if they were engaged in a race, rattled over the boards on the long stretch towards the couple, who had suddenly stopped, one in her turning and the other in his advance, by perceiving their mutual error.

Unluckily, Pontferrand had been unable to repress his joyous salutation of “What a dear you are to come so far! I hope I have not kept you waiting!”

“He called her his dear mistress!” gasped Justine, coming to a stop for the want of breath.

“Oh! you call her your ‘dear,’ do you?” cried Madame Pontferrand, who somehow found breath in spite of the severe burst.

It is an astonishing fact that when a woman of this type wishes to tongue-lash a man she is never at a loss for breath. In another moment poor Pontferrand was as if surrounded by Actæon’s hounds. Madame de Thauzette flashed an offended glance upon him, his wife glared as though she hoped to consume him to ashes, and Justine, who tossed her head as if she thought this was the adventure she expected on the part of

any Parisian lady, alternatively eyed her master and Madame de Thauzette with indignation.

It was a most awkward situation.

While all opened their mouths to say something, something that probably would have been better unsaid, luckily, there was an overwhelming scream from the engine-whistle of the train which that deceptive scoundrel Eusèbe had assured his friend and patron would be stopped at Val-en-Cruse. It ran noisily by. The women instantly forgot their emotion to spring away from the edge; but the gentleman was too much paralyzed to budge.

So close to the train was he that he could almost have touched a pleased yet astonished face that appeared at a carriage window: it was that of the cause of all his present pother, who was being carried on to Bardannesville. When the thunder died away the embarrassed Pontferrand still stood like one whom the lightnings of his wife's eyes had benumbed.

She returned to the charge thereupon.

"I don't half understand what has brought you here, and what is going on, or the presence of this lady," she said.

"I don't myself!" muttered Pontferrand. "It is some hoax! That's it; my cronies are making an April fool of me! It would puzzle a lawyer else——"

"It shall not puzzle my lawyer long," interrupted

Madame Pontferrand. "I shall write to my uncle to engage the costliest counsel at the Palace of Justice! A divorce, sir, a divorce, under the new law!" and away she strode, accompanied by Justine, to swoon away comfortably in the waiting-room. Her final glance of undying animosity was towards the now merely amused Madame de Thauzette. Seeing the coast clear of this gorgon, the unfortunate man gradually came to the use of his limbs much after the manner of the actor who plays "The Vampire," and who is resuscitated by the moonbeams. He made a low bow to Madame de Thauzette, although she had scornfully turned her back upon him, and, regaining his wits too, he flew to the telegraph office. There he communicated with the operator at Bardannesville, and directed him to make such arrangements at his expense for the disposition of this provoking visitor from Paris as would ensure ten miles at least remaining between her and Madame Pontferrand until further orders. This done, he stroked down his face into the most contrite expression imaginable, and with all the courage he could muster went to learn how Madame was getting on. She was not to be seen, but Justine, not unimpressed by the intimation that her Christmas-box next coming would contain a valuable bon-bon, promised, after sundry sniffs and protestations, that she would do her best to slip in a

kind word for her master as she took the victim home by easy stages.

She recommended him, just as if she had divined his wishes, not to come home at least until it was time to start for the dinner at the Count de Bardannes', always provided that Madame would be in a fit state of nerves to enable her to sit at table without a resemblance to the conventional mummy at the Egyptian Banquets. As for Madame de Thauzette, she quite forgot, in her more serious broodings, this episode which she deemed purely farcical. She continued her promenade wondering with more and more pain what could have delayed Fernand.

And what could have delayed Fernand ?

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT REVERSED THE FLIGHT OF THE WIDOW'S SON

FERNAND DE THAUZETTE had found a horse so much better than he expected at a farmer's that he galloped away with a speed which rejoiced his heart. For want of knowledge of the country, he allowed himself to be carried to a greater distance than he desired. He found himself stopped at last by his horse suddenly falling lame; it had hurt itself with the flints of the new railway cutting. He abandoned the steed without any commiseration for its silent suffering, and climbed to the top of what he thought to be a hill before him. The hill, however, was cleft abruptly; at his feet the railway lines extended right and left. In a little hollow a man was slowly walking, every now and then, apparently at haphazard, smiting the metals with a long-handled hammer. He was so absorbed in his occupation, listening very attentively to the ring of the iron, that he did not hear Fernand's hail. The young gen-

ttelman, therefore, walked along the edge till he found the incline somewhat gentle, and descended to the level. He enquired where he was, and the man gave him some points of local topography that would have been of greater value if Fernand had known anything of the places so cited. Still, he could understand that on the other side of the long tunnel which gaped at a moderate distance from them he should find the station of Val-en-Creuse, where his mother, no doubt, was waiting. "By the road," volunteered the man, "it is a long way about, and, besides, they have lately been mending the roads, and the hard stones will play the plague with such fine town leather as your boots'."

"I suppose you mean," said Fernand, "that I had better make a short cut of it by going through that tunnel. But what about the trains?"

The man intimated that there need be no fear of them; that, in fact, he and some other workmen would not be strewn up and down the line thereabouts if they were liable to be painfully interrupted.

So Fernand tossed him a coin and walked beside the rails towards Longuebranche.

There was nothing particularly inviting in the aspect of the tunnel. Its mouth was scooped out of the rocks overgrown with rugged shrubs; and at the extreme end, in the ring of dark black mist, a pale orange glow scarcely more than perceptible—something like the

sickly yolk in an omelette upon which the chimney soot has fallen into the pan. However, there was no doubt of this being a straight line.

As he moved nearer the mouth somebody in a little house on wheels called out to him. But he was already beginning to fret at the loss of time, and hurried on without even turning his head.

He plunged into the tunnel.

After a few steps, the cold and dampness gave him a shiver till he pulled his coat tight round him, and caught it on one or two buttons. The darkness began to thicken, and at very long intervals only air-holes let in a dull glimmering. The walking, too, was not at all comfortable to one inexperienced; between the metal—there was a kind of gutter which collected the drainage, similar to those, though less deep, on both sides of the tunnel. In this channel the sharp square-ended sleepers projected, and would have sufficed to break the arm or split the skull of any one tripping up and falling upon them. Between the sleepers the coarse gravel was excessively trying. As for walking along the iron, a skilled rope-dancer would hardly have cared to long continue it; instead of the metal being beautifully smooth, as it appeared at a distance, the edges were frayed off in jags and slivers, looking very frail, but steeled into cutting points, which very soon made mince-meat of his **fastidiously fitting boots.**

The silence for a while remained unbroken, and became oppressive ere long.

At last he heard muffled voices, and, his eyes being accustomed to the gloom, espied vague figures before him making incomprehensible gestures. They looked like gnomes preparing to defend their melancholy subterranean region from this lone intruder.

Even so little absence from the sunlight made the young man glad to speak with a fellow-being, and naturally conjecturing that they were the workmen whom the person with the hammer had spoken of, he floundered on more quickly. Presently, indeed, he found his way literally barred by a score of navvies. They looked very savage indeed, with their long flowing beards and slouched hats cocked as romantically as any brigands', and their clothes were stained with all sorts of oxides—red, green, black, and yellow. By the faint lurid rays of a couple of lanterns, these splashings and tricklings, and their reddened arms bared to the elbow, suggested the semblance of surgeons and their aids after a battle. They stared at him hard, and in a surly manner seemed determined not to let him pass through their midst. Indeed, as he hardly knew how to begin a conversation, and meant to walk along without attempting one, two of them deliberately crossed their pick-axes before him and brought him to a standstill. He uttered an indignant exclamation.

Upon this "the ganger" stepped forward, a giant somewhat more uncouth and more thickly plastered with clay and mud, and sprinkled with more slimy sand than his mates. In a voice like the roaring of a half-tamed bull, he demanded the business of this stranger.

Fernand explained that he wished to go through the tunnel in order to reach the first station beyond. The chief of the working men gravely responded that it was no thoroughfare for persons not attached to the railway company, and not only must he turn back instanter, but that he ought to consider himself very lucky that they did not hand him over to the company's police inspector to be imprisoned unless he chose to pay the swingeing fine. He added, with a slight softening of his voice and a wink to his lieutenants, which elicited a low laugh, that he thought it only fair return for his hint that, as a gentleman, he would stand them half a louis for their supper wine ; that would not be a quarter of the fine trespassers incurred.

"But," remonstrated Fernand, producing the coin, but still holding it between his fingers, "can't you let me go through if I make you this present ?"

"Well, no, sir!" answered the commander of the repairing gang ; "we can't let you go through as things are now. If you get a pass from the clerk of the works out there, we would only be too glad to let your honour go by."

"The clerk?" queried Fernand, who saw nobody here of a literary aspect.

"Yes, you must have passed him, sir, a red-haired man, not unlike a monkey, perched up in a little box on wheels at a desk, laying his sharp eyes about him like a ferret does ; mighty ready, I assure you, to see everything that goes on, and a good many things too that a poor workman don't do ! all to make a mark against him in his cursed black books."

"Oh, yes, I remember to have passed him," said Fernand, vexed now that he should have been so inattentive to the clerk's challenge.

"All right, sir ; just you come back with a pass, and we will put you through. Thank you, sir ; much obliged to your honour!" and all the men chorused their thanks. Fernand turned away in deep annoyance, but it was no use spiting himself by delay with a task before him just commenced ; and he retraced his steps as far as the tunnel's mouth. The clerk was hard at work in his portable house, and did not care to be interrupted, but he was not insensible to a golden argument, and he speedily filled up the blanks in a printed form, affixed the seal and his signature, with all the attention to detail which characterizes the French functionary, however impatient might be the applicant. Without glancing at the paper or submitting to its being sanded, Fernand almost snatched it away and dashed into the tunnel again.

At this rate, the shortest route bid fair to be as tedious as the longest way round.

When he arrived there the ground seemed more rugged than before, and the platelayers, he fancied, grinned peculiarly and merrily; but if he had thought in the least of this matter, he would have attributed this mirth to their enjoying his gratitude by anticipation. He presented the paper to the captain of the gang, and he puzzled it out, more or less upside down, and a hedge was made for him to go through with a great deal too much of ostentation. After he went by and it had closed up, the men, instead of resuming their labour, communed in groups with laughter that was a great deal more hearty than respectful.

On he stumbled. The darkness grew thicker and thicker, the air closer and more impregnated with sulphurous cinders. The white glass insulators, holding the telegraph wires along the moist sides, stared at him like lidless eyes of marine monsters. Now and again a rag or a newspaper dangling from the end of some twisted wire irresistibly suggested the likeness of a man in evening dress—all shirt-front except the black coat and continuations—who had hanged himself there. Cold and damp allied themselves with such ghastly emotions as to keep his cuticle in one perpetual creepiness.

He stopped at last, almost dead beat. On looking

towards the mouths of the tunnel, they both seemed to be of the same size. He calculated, therefore, that he was at about the centre. After moving along a little farther, he had to correct his calculations. Beyond a doubt, one end was larger than the other, and, consequently, much farther off. He was so fatigued, and in such pain with his battered feet, that he fairly despaired.

Fortitude is not a leading quality of such characters.

He sat down on the end of a beam, with his feet inside the gully, the icy water being rather a relief than otherwise to his bruises and cuts, and so rested. On looking up again, the end longest away of the tunnel seemed only to promise to protract his tribulation. He suddenly determined to go back as he had come ; he would there wait for a train after communicating with his mother by the electric medium upon the reason for this unfortunate delay. Collecting his energies, he accordingly returned.

Just at the moment when he firmly believed that he was no longer able to put one foot before the other a piercing scream and increasing rolling of thunder made him glance back in the direction of the sounds. The mouth that way was dotted with a minute speck which enlarged at every instant, and soon filled up the grey disk. It was a train, he thought, and the prospect of meeting that fiery monster, of which the two red eyes

were already separating, from having been one at first view, was awful. The walls were perfectly smooth, nothing like any of those recesses whither the workmen fly for refuge in such emergencies. He set to running. He was only within hearing of the cries of the workmen, when he was sure that the engine was overtaking him ; he felt it driving a column of air before it, whilst its lamps were surrounded by its own smoke, beaten down and then rolling away. Unused to such a sight, he could not distinguish on which line of rails it was travelling, and, horrified at the idea of his dainty body being converted into an unsightly mass, he threw himself in the channel on one side. At the same moment the locomotive rushed on, while his whole frame shook with the earth's vibration ; his heart actually stood still. The sensation was over in a second. It was an engine without a train. He arose, soaked and muddled, and staggered, with the eagerness of man to have the comforts of his fellows, towards the navvies, who, in their turn, had sent out a detachment of helpers towards him. The ganger examined him by the lantern light, and had him rubbed down with some straw. He did not make him presentable at State receptions, and he was none the less damp ; but it prevented the clay caking upon him.

One of the men had a flask of liquor, and allowed him to drink.

As soon as he had recovered he announced his intention of foregoing any further progress in his mad attempt, and that he only asked to get out of this hideous vault. The ganger, however, made a sign to his men, who formed in a row across the way, and, with mock politeness, responded :

“Certainly, sir, if that is down in your pass.”

What could the man mean by that? He pulled out the paper, which he had almost disregarded; it had become wet, and the chief navvy's hard fingers made sad havoc with the fibre as he unfolded it after drying it a little at the lantern.

“Well, there, you see; that's clear enough! it reads as it did before!” cried Fernand, testily. “I hope you are not going to stop me now while I am catching cold.”

“I am very sorry, sir,” said the foreman, in a tone that belied his words; “the pass is all right as far as it went, or perhaps I ought to say as far as you went; but, if you don't mind looking at it again, you will see that it is a permit for you to *go through* the tunnel; but I can't see a word about it authorizing you to *come back*! You see, sir, this very strict company don't like to object to gentlemen such as you going upon the line, or even through the tunnels, when there is not any traffic about, because many a gentleman writes to the newspapers when not let to have his own way, and the

company don't like that. So the clerk only gives just what he is asked for, and no more. You said you wanted a pass to go through the tunnel, and there you have got it. If you had asked for a double pass, one that would bring you back, you would have been saved this trouble."

"Oh, very well!" sneered Fernand, trying to keep up his end of the joke with a good deal of ill grace; "it will be with much pleasure that I will run and ask that clerk to put this down on the paper. I shall be only too glad to spend the rest of the afternoon in passing and repassing your amiable company."

"Ha! ha! much obliged, sir; but you can't go by here. You will have to go out through the tunnel straight on, that way. I don't want to hurry you, but if you are not pretty smart over it, you may be caught between the two trains that are due fifty-three minutes hence. Judging by the pace you prefer, I reckon you will meet them just about the old milestone, where many an unfortunate platelayer has been cut to pieces, all because the company won't make a man-hole extra. I say again, you can't pass here. You will have to go on, sir."

He turned his back unceremoniously, and as if the remembrance of the orthodox interruption to their labours which the resumption of traffic must in fact inflict compelled him to regret wasting so much time

in this grim pleasantry, he and his men fell to work with more spirit than before. With their picks and shovels flashing about in all directions, they formed a deadly impenetrable phalanx, which Fernand had to give up any idea of attacking.

Beginning to more than suspect that some evil genius was wreaking his spite upon him, Fernand resumed his delightful walk once more. Every bone seemed to ache with an individuality of pain, and his nerves were relaxed so as to move, with an effort, mechanically. The workmen had evidently been renewing the gravel here, for he got along very badly; but as he dared not stop, he was glad to see the opening of the vault appreciably widen.

In the end, so far there had been no sound of approaching trains. That was the only consolation, in the midst of his misery, between him and the broadening circle of light where he was happy to think the warm sunshine awaited him. Nothing intervened but one man. He had on an oil-stained cape and the blue blouse of the ordinary workman, and was tapping the rails with a long-handled hammer; he was about a hundred yards from the opening himself. Fernand pressed on as soon as he distinguished this was a man, and almost joyfully called out to him:

“I can’t go much farther. I wish you would lend me your arm my friend, to help me out of this con-

founded place! I am afraid every minute that there will be a train come in."

At the sound of the voice the man gave an exaggerated start, shouldered his hammer as a soldier would his musket, turned round with his head up, and said, in a slightly jocular tone :

"Upon my word, it is that dear young M. de Thauzette ! Who would have believed I should have the pleasure of meeting him in this hole ? But I dare say you have been going in for another 'sensation !'"

Of all men in the world it was M. Thouvenin, and in this smock-frock and oily cap ! Fernand stopped short with amazement. A spark of intelligence sprang to light within him, and was rapidly fanned into a blaze. He commenced to suspect that the freaks of the plate-layers had been inspired by some superior "head and front of this offending."

As his stare became a scowl, Thouvenin laughed again.

"Oh, I see you are rather puzzled at my being here. Oh, that's the most natural thing in the world. I own a good many shares in this branch line. I have found that it is one of those sure profitable things that our worthy friend Pontferrand wishes to invest in. I very often walk up and down the line with or without my friend the chief repairer of the permanent way, and I am following my volunteer vocation now."

Fernand felt so humiliated in his draggled state, which showed up to little advantage even beside the smock-frock and oily cap of Thouvenin, that all he thought of was to get out of his sight as soon as possible, and out of hearing of his gibing voice. As soon as he came abreast of him, however, Thouvenin swung out his hammer, with which he described an air-line across the tunnel.

"I beg your pardon, M. de Thauzette," he said ; "if I were in my private capacity as a mere well-wisher of yours—since you are my friend and the count's—I should, instead of detaining you, hurry you on to where you would get a change of clothes and a good warm at a fire ; but, do you see ? I am taking the place of my friend the superintendent of the repairing gang, and, as his representative, I am bound to be not merely precise, but over-exacting, in carrying out the rules and regulations of the company. I must, it follows, trouble you—still being forced to regard you as a stranger, not as a friend—to let me see what authority—written it must be—you have for being within a covered way of the line."

Fernand blurted out something rude about his having the confounded pass, and tried to proceed ; but the hammer was swung round again ominously, and, whether he liked it or not, he was fain to pull out the written paper and display it to his challenger.

"Quite right," said Thouvenin, with provoking slowness; "but no, no! not all ~~that you may~~ probably wish. I see that it authorizes you to go through the tunnel; but there is no permission expressed here for you to go one step beyond! I am therefore compelled—still remembering that I am acting for the superintendent—to request you will stop when you get to the mouth of the tunnel there——"

"And wait there to die of cold until some other clerk of the works furnishes me with another stupid paper. You will carry this joke too far, sir. I have borne quite enough from these brutal *employés*, but as for you, you are something in the shape of a gentleman, and I demand satisfaction instantly, or an apology."

"My dear M. de Thauzette," replied the inventor, coolly, "I don't travel around with duelling pistols in my pocket, and, as for fencing, I am a great deal more used to cold chisels than small swords. Besides, if we were supplied with such weapons, I really don't think it would be polite of me to detain you here for a bout with them, since you are at this moment expected to call with your mother on M. Brissot with the answer—in person, mind—to a message, very peremptory, which he entrusted to you. Your mother, by the way, is waiting at the station out there. I took the trouble to send one of our men thither about twelve minutes since, when I first sighted your approach. She thereby knows

that you are somewhere at hand. There is nothing lost by the time gone by, because M. Brissot was, some hours ago, at a pitch of wrath which must have prevented him conducting the ceremony of betrothal with befitting deliberation. He will have cooled down by this time, and will no longer feel like strangling the persons who disagree with him ! As I believe you will promise me that, without any intention this time of pledging yourself falsely, as you do to women, at all events—as you will promise, I repeat, to accompany your mother back to the château—I have not the slightest objection now, as well in my own capacity as in that of my friend the superintendent, to letting you pass out of the tunnel to the station."

"Let !" cried Fernand, who had tried half a dozen times to break into the speaker's irritating words, but had been repressed by the glitter of his calm eye ; "let, indeed ! I tell you, M. Thouvenin, though I am trembling, it is with wet and cold from my accident, not from any fear of you or your big words ! I shall leave this place over your body if you don't make way, and I shall go with my mother whichever course we choose to turn."

"Still one word to that decision, M. Fernand !" answered Thouvenin, taking up a second hammer similar to that he was holding ; "since you are talking about going about over people's bodies, I am not the man to

submit unresistingly to any such *sensation*. If we have not pistols here or fencing swords, here are a couple of instruments with which a man can defend himself or give a death-blow equally as if in the code of honour. They are both alike. There is one for you!" throwing one hammer down at Fernand's feet; "take it up and try to execute that threat of yours. I have only to add that you had better be quick about it, because in eight minutes two trains will arrive at about this point, as nearly simultaneously as I can measure it, and if you should happen to be too much engrossed in passing over my body to pay attention to them, I am very much afraid that the train will pull up under the eyes of your esteemed mamma, at the station yonder, with your body or mine, or both, more or less unpleasantly dangling across the fenders."

Fernand caught up the hammer with a bloodthirsty feeling, and if by any chance he had felt assured that he could deal one swinging blow at this taunting, mocking obstacle at an unguarded place, ten to one he would have done so. But, unfortunately for that murderous wish, Thouvenin had fallen on guard with such an experienced carriage of the strange weapon, that the young man thought it best to fling his down and cry out that those were not intended for the settlement of disputes between gentlemen.

"Since you will not fight," observed Thouvenin,

"and since that refusal implies that you have renounced your intention of walking over my body, I presume that you have accepted the other branch of the proposition. It is, therefore, understood between us, my dear young sir, that you and your mother, with half an hour allowed you to assume fitter apparel which is waiting for you at the station-master's, will mount into the carriage in which I came over from the count's, and which will take you both back there without anybody knowing that you had been elsewhere than upon a little pleasure excursion. I am quite confident that M. Brissot is the man to pursue you all the world over until he has satisfaction. I don't know as I am very vindictive myself, but I am counted pertinacious, and in case of any accident befalling him, I rather think that I should take up the chase with considerable relish. Here's to our next meeting, in or out of tunnels, M. de Thauzette! You will excuse me depriving myself of the treat of seeing your mamma receive her prodigal son; but I am bound to wait here a few seconds longer till my friend the superintendent comes and relieves me."

Thoroughly cowed, Fernand sprang away with a drooping head, and knowing, too, that at the coming of the trains, of which he heard the sound plainly, one or both would discharge passengers on the platform, and that they would stare at him in his present pickle,

this shameful fear invigorated him into hastening on to hide away in the station.

In about an hour's time, Brissot, who had got as far as the gatekeeper's lodge in his starting to search for the missing de Thauzette, had his question answered by seeing the two in a carriage which was driving rapidly up to the gates.

CHAPTER XXI.

A TREATY OF PEACE WITH BOTH PARTIES UNDER ARMS.

THE Parisian widow, to whom Fernand did not think it necessary to detail the story of his adventure, did not think him safe until she had lodged him in her own rooms. While he was nerving himself to hear her account of the ordeal which the coward by much preferred she should endure in his stead as regards Captain Brissot, she, in the outer room, hurried on her maid to be at least, faultless in dress.

Her "toilet of the condemned" was a splendid brocade of Vandyke red velvet, with plain silk sleeves and demi-train. The scrupulously-fitting waistcoat and cuffs were worked with white crêpe in knife pleats on a pale rosy silk ground, and pink satin armlets vaguely suggested the bands of late worn for mourning on over-coats. Her features did not express any other feelings than distress about her son and wounded pride, but as

she kept a lace handkerchief whisking up to her eyes, one might fancy that she was weeping.

When she descended to the great hall, she found it deserted for a few minutes. Brissot, who had, as we stated, seen her and her son return from their annulled flight in the carriage, had no further uneasiness after they were caged. He came in slowly from the gardens, where the count was promenading until Thouvenin came back as he had promised.

Madame de Thauzette offered her excuses.

"I assure you," she said, making no allusion to the escapade, "that I did not mean to be behindhand, but I had to talk seriously with my son in such a way that there could not be any future misunderstanding between us. I vow to you, Brissot, I did not know what happened long ago. Fernand behaved very badly, it is true, but he was so young. I know I spoiled him, but that is no reason why I should lose him by death. He wanted to come down with me now, but I insisted on the other thing. I—I had to take him out for a change of air and a carriage drive. You did treat him brutally, M. Brissot!"

"He ought to have defended himself better, then," answered the bailiff.

"In order that you would have had the excuse to make an end of this sad matter altogether!"

"When a man stands up to another like a man, he

never fares so ill as when he lets himself be knocked about," was the old soldier's vinegar in the wounds.

"Well, he is badly bruised, and nursing himself in my room, whilst waiting the result of our interview. He will go as soon as I tell him. This is no place for him. But be sure that he will do what you require; he will not try to avoid his obligations."

"Not this time, madame! Of that we have made sure."

Going to the glass doors, he signalled to the count, who he saw had been joined by M. Thouvenin. The latter had no doubt been relieved of his railway duties by his friend the chief of the permanent way repairers, for he had arrived free of hammer, cap, and blouse.

"What is that, sir?" inquired the lady.

"Only my beckoning for my lord and his friend M. Thouvenin. At the pace they move they will come in at about the same time as my wife and Denise Brissot, whom I have bid come hither."

"Really!" observed the Parisian dame, in vexed surprise, for she had thought a little of her superior wit would go a good way with the honest old warrior. "I understand why you should require Denise, although her presence will be almost as painful for me as for you; but what have the count and this stranger to do with our affair?"

"I want them to be witnesses of what passes between

us, a most serious matter, so that if ever you break the engagement you will have to make—for I shall not break mine—both these gentlemen may declare that I only did what I had a right to do."

"I forewarn you that I have very little money now," she quickly said, thinking that her pretensions had misled the old soldier, as she hoped they did all the world beside. "I can only give my son a very modest income."

"So much the better! He will have to set to work, and none too soon. As for his wife, working will only be what she is used to do."

"I cannot answer for the result of a marriage contracted in this way," remonstrated she, haughtily.

"I'll answer for that. So long as I am alive, this son of yours will toe the line, and I mean to live a little longer, because, somehow or other, I did not blow out my brains an hour ago."

The lady lowered her eyes; this prospect of such a martinet being in her family and authorized to keep her son in order came as welcome as the announcement by *Paterfamilias* to a brood of dragged-up children that a tutor with a reputation for strictness was going to be let loose upon them.

Fortunately, to give her time to recover from her dismay, her dialoguist left her a little to go to open the garden door-window widely for the admission of the master of the house and the inventor.

"I must ask your pardon, gentlemen," said he, "for having disturbed you; but I cannot do very well without you being witnesses to what is going to happen here."

Thouvenin said he was only too happy to oblige the lady. André was glancing at Denise, who came into the room with her mother, both grave and resigned.

The assemblage was complete. Madame de Thauzette felt ashamed that she should be standing alone against a whole phalanx of enemies, whilst the son for whom she bore all this humiliating treaty-making was in all likelihood consoling himself with a cigar.

"My lord count," began Brissot, with a voice and bearing highly becoming, "you have done me the honour to ask for my daughter's hand. She has confessed to you that she is not free to give it; though," he continued with some bitterness, "she never believed it her duty to let me know that. So, then, my lord, kindly take back your offer, as I should do if I were you. My daughter is secretly engaged to M. de Thauzette, and Madame de Thauzette is here to claim her prior rights, and to ask my daughter's hand for her son. "Is that true, madame?" he appealed to Madame de Thauzette, who had been looking out of the windows.

It was only by a great effort that she was able to supplement her nod with a spoken affirmative. Then clearing her throat of what she hoped would be con-

sidered an appropriate sob, she said, with a glance at Denise, who needed not, even under this eye, the encouragement of her mother to keep firm :

“ My dear Brissot, I have the honour to ask you and my friend, your wife, for the hand of your respected daughter for my son.”

“ And it is truly in your son’s name, madame, that you pledge your word ? ”

“ In his name, without any reservation.”

“ When would you like the marriage to come off ? ”

“ As soon as you like,” she answered, with a sigh, for the presence of the count and M. Thouvenin effectually prevented any cajolery upon the Brissots, and denying her present engagements in the future.

“ That, then, is as soon as we can get through the required formalities.”

“ Very well. Shall it be here or in town ? ”

“ My daughter will leave for town at once with her mother, and the wedding will take place there *most publicly.*”

“ In Paris, most publicly,” she repeated, biting her lip savagely.

“ Does the young lady consent to this ? ”

“ Yes, madame,” was the calm reply of Denise.

The compact was irrevocably settled. After four years Denise Brissot would become Madame Fernand de Thauzette, and only the little babe in its grave, where

no father had ever gone to weep, would be much the loser in society's purblind eyes.

" May I have your hand on it, madame ? " proceeded Brissot, to end the ceremonial.

" Willingly," she replied ; but it was a terrible qualm she felt as her aristocratic hand was clasped in that of the plebeian which had nearly strangled her darling boy. Brissot released it, and drew back with quite a respectful bow ; he had, indeed, much sympathy for this woman who shielded her son. Then the lady and Madame Brissot exchanged salutations, and Denise advanced to receive the kiss of her future mother-in-law with the coldness of Galatea animated for the occasion only.

" Since events have come out this way, I assure you that I will do all that is possible to make you happy."

" And I, madame, will be grateful for all that you do for me," returned the girl, in a tone at least as sincere.

The count had looked on at this ceremony, which raised a hateful barrier between him and the woman he loved, with a whole whirl of emotion in his heart. At every moment he felt impelled to interrupt the odious bargain, and yet he refrained from one syllable that would have delayed it.

There was nothing more wanted of the Brissot ladies, but Thouvenin came over to them as they were making for the door,

"I should like to have the *honour* of shaking your hand, mademoiselle," cried he, more impulsively than was his wont, but he was still a little warm with glee at having balked Fernand in his plot.

Denise gave him her hand heartily, together with a glad and grateful look which repaid him for all he had done on her account without her knowledge that day so eventful.

"Would you do me the further favour of accepting me as witness of your marriage, as well as my lord here? We would like to join in it, I think," he queried, rather timidly glancing over at the count.

For an inventor this was a happy invention. The young noble started, and, in a deeply moved voice, added his assurance to the offer.

"By the way," went on Thouvenin, speaking livelily, to relieve the company of the unquestioned gloom pervading, "as I do not know if you ladies have any particular place to go to in town, and I have lots of room in my house, you must let me offer you hospitality up to the wedding morning, in the name of my wife, of course. We will be delighted to receive you. I will hand you over to her, in fact, for I would like to be let accompany you to Paris."

"How good of you, sir!" ejaculated good Madame Brissot, whilst her husband stood aghast; "I cannot tell you how thankful I am."

"I am quite ready, ladies; so we can start when you like."

"Half an hour will do," answered the housewife, who would have pledged her reputation as a packer to make a bundle of the forge appurtenances of Vulcan in case of his departing skyward for his wedding with the Dame of Beauty.

Only on the occasion of a wedding can a woman display alacrity and decision not to be blamed. They are so afraid that man will awake to reason if there be the slightest check.

Brissot had turned to his loved master with moist eyes and voice unsteady as he asked his pardon for giving him so much pain for honour's sake. One could see that his regret for the inevitable rested heavily on his suddenly much-tried heart.

"I have my burden here, too," said André. "I presume you understood that you remain here beside me?" he added.

"Yes, indeed! since you are good enough to allow it," returned the bailiff, with quiet thankfulness in his parting glance as he left the hall.

Madame de Thauzette had lingered, unable to find a chance for one of those departures with *éclat* which a Parisian studies all her life. She was even ignored by Thouvenin and the count, and was obliged to cough politely for notice.

"It is a time for formalities," she remarked, with a slight sarcastic accent. "Am I expected to take formal leave of Martha?"

"Certainly; but this is the place for that. I want her to receive the explanation due to her from you. Be good enough to let her know that you are waiting for her when you are ready."

After this, in a coldly courteous tone, he took the arm of Thouvenin, and left the lady to return to her son with the best story she could make of the transaction.

CHAPTER XXII.

MENTOR AND TORMENTOR

ANDRÉ proceeded with Thouvenin to his study with fervent gratitude in return for the latter's impromptu hospitality to the Brissots at his house in town. The finest-bred gentleman could not have been *guilty* of any act more graceful : he tried cynically to express it. How wise was the inventor in his advice for this heroic girl to be married without any tergiversation, and how wise, to boot, in his foretelling that irreparable mischief would otherwise result.

Thouvenin was a little disappointed ; not being a man of uncontrollable impulses himself, he liked to see them move others. He had confidently expected that, at any moment, the count would have cast aside the proprieties and solved the perplexity by rushing up to Denise and clasping her to his yearning heart.

But he remembered that the nobleman had been schooled to resist and master true springings of senti-

ment. Fashionable circles confined the exhibition of feeling, and particularly pity and mercy, unless in the form of a cheque at a charity bazaar.

When the two were in the library, and the library door closed, the manufacturer looked away from his friend, who was distressed to tears, the more as he feared he had rejected a pearl of price.

"Well," observed Thouvenin, at length, "it seems that while you must not be beholden to anybody for money and the like, your station does not shield you from accepting sacrifices. I suppose you are going to let Mdlle. Brissot conclude this marriage, though 'twill be the despair of her lifetime?"

"Don't be so sure of it being too long a despair for her. The marriage she may have to make, yes, that must be; but that young de Thauzette should be a burden of thorns to her many a year is another matter —one that unnerves me."

He expressed himself in such an ominous tone of deadly resolution that the other started.

"Here, here!" he interrupted. "You have no grounds to meddle with M. de Thauzette." Which was not very consistent, coming from the man who had offered the youth in question the novelty of a duel with rail-testing hammers.

"Nevertheless," went on the other sternly, "I shall call him to account."

"Not at all. Is not old man Brissot yet on his feet and with a strong arm?"

"I must call him to account," repeated André.

"For what?"

"For the lie he told me."

"When? What lie? I had no idea you two had been carrying on a conversation."

"When I consented to his admission into my family, Thouvenin; when my honour was in his hands; when I asked him for the truth about Mdlle. Brissot, under a pledge that it should go no further, he lied to me then most foully."

"And so you will call out M. de Thauzette? since it would not look nice, I grant, for papa-in-law to put a bullet in his son."

"And I'll kill the cur!" cried de Bardannes, solemnly lifting his hand heavenward in attestation. "In the first quarter of the honeymoon Mdlle. Brissot will cease to have a blackguard for a husband, and so I'll repay her for much that I owe her."

"You will kill him, or he will kill you," said Thouvenin, in his somewhat pedantic way of making things exceedingly plain. "Admitting, now, that you kill him, you will have killed the son of a lady whom you were fond of once. A youthful folly, I grant. Very well! She is a frivolous feather-brained coquette and anything else you like, but she has one redeeming

virtue—a love for her son. You see, there will be two deaths if you kill this Fernand. He *is* a scamp, but once, for a wonder, he has acted properly."

"How so?" with surprise.

"Why, you are always astride the steed of etiquette. You know well that no man must divulge his secret relations with a woman, particularly with a young woman."

"Under the present circumstances," began André.

"You would have acted just like he did."

"No."

"I say yes," returned Thouvenin, firmly. "At least I hope so for your credit as a man of gallantry. Put the case the other way: if M. de Thauzette had come to ask you, under the same conditions, if you had cut him out with a woman, would you have told him? There you see," he added, calmly triumphantly, as de Bardannes lowered his head. "Now don't rake it up again. Your argument fails. Can you stand the absolute truth?"

The count acquiesced by his moody silence, still fastening his eyes on the sage.

"The point is not to tell lies at the risk of one's life and honour in order to save a woman's reputation, but not to deceive women in the first place. In all women one ought to respect the first that he knew and loved—his mother!—no matter where they are met. Do not

debase them if they live on high ; do not trample them down if they dwell humbly. One must marry for the single reason that he loves one woman only and for ever. This is the hard bottom truth. All that assumes that holy name has been invented afterwards to excuse a more or less finikin and dissolute society. It is not this de Thauzette's way of thinking any more than it is yours, worse luck ! Like most men of your class, you have shared in the immorality of your time, but that does not make you more kind to the faults of others than indulgent for your own, and you say you must resist the impulse of your heart when I tell you to marry the woman who loves you and whom you love."

On every reiteration of this fact André winced as if a hot iron were pressed upon his breast.

It was so : Denise had been faulty, but she had redeemed herself if only by this last and greatest proof of loving confidence that one human being can show another—the voluntary immolation of her honour, and the love, respect, and happiness of her venerated parents, in order that another girl should be preserved in dignity and fortune. And yet this other girl had no other claim on so many sacrifices than in being the sister of the man whom she silently adored.

" I say she loves you and you love her," proceeded Thouvenin, returning to the charge, " and you cannot do better than wed her."

He looked André straight in the eye, and the latter felt his stubborn pride melt under that regular steadily fixed gaze, like iron in a superheated furnace.

"Of course, you believe your *stylish* morality correct when you say, 'These precepts are all very well for those vulgar Thouvenin people, but they won't do for the de Bardannes. We are the old nobility with another kind of *etiquette*!'" cried he, in a ringing voice, free from the tone of preaching, perhaps impairing his foregoing sentences. "That poor girl suffered in the past from a result not wholly of her creation. You would suffer almost as terribly in time to come if you will not see that you are causing all her present tribulation."

"I?" protested the count.

"You, André," said the elder, tenderly but severely, like a surgeon who must tell the truth, however shocking, to one doomed to a critical operation.

Indeed, the count had not to question himself long. He saw that he had brought the characters into this conflicting and entangled group.

It was he who had allowed, even fostered, the widow of Thauzette in her visits to his sister at the convent school. Pestered as the lady was with a spendthrift son whom no honourable family would embrace, and yet who had no other resources than marrying an heiress, the count ought not even to have seemed to authorize

the match-maker's familiarity with Martha. The world would not believe that his friendship was entirely due to sympathy with the relict of an old friend. It would go farther and suggest a closer and sweeter connection. It would say that he dared not refuse, for potent reasons, such a mark of esteem and approval as her invitation to the Château de Bardannes. Of course, the world would know nothing of the first refusal, and would think Martha had not been imperfectly defended by the nunnery walls, or by the governess at home.

"You were quite right," went on Thouvenin, "to withhold your sister's hand when Madame de Thauzette requested it ; but why go back on that and do, shortly after, the reversal of your conclusion ? If you will tell me that you simply obeyed your brotherly affection your love for Denise, and your indulgence for this foolish hen with one chicken, just say so, and I'll shut up ; but, no ! you had a secret design to find out a truth otherwise unseizable. Yours was a hidden hope that rather than let your sister be trapped by that scoundrel, Mdlle. Brissot would make a clean breast of it, and, while destroying herself, let you know all you wanted. You *have* split open that adored and impossible forehead, and out of the brains you have squeezed a secret ! You had no right to do it," thundered the moralist in a powerful burst of indignation.

“Either you do not love the young lady of the Brissots, in which case you ought to have let her alone, and not gone fooling about her story ; or you did love her, and then you were bound to her for all your life, whether it was good or bad. When a loving woman has spoken to a loving man as loyally and touchingly as she did a while ago, when they have shed tears together over a fading stain, oh, be that stain washed away for ever ! Thence springs the redemption of one and the oblivion of the other. The bond of their souls and their hearts must each day grow thicker and stronger. Do you think now that you belong to the list of marriageable young men, and that you can get one of the matrimonial agents to give you the number of some nice young client, who will jump at your offer ? Stuff and nonsense ! You may pack up and go to the end of the world, but you will be haunted by this dear remembrance, which will bring you back at last to the arms of that valiant girl. God grant that you will not return too late ! ” he concluded, fervently. “ Marry Denise, your Denise ! You must learn that the grandest, most divine things in man are mercy and forgiveness ! ”

He left him by himself to continue the struggle, out of which, without his support, he might not have come triumphant.

André looked at the portraits of his parents. Had

not their life been one of love so constant that neither could long have survived the other? His die was cast. He was doomed to obey the dictates of love whether cheerfully or not. He was one of those whom Cupid ensnares after the spring, and on the verge of summer who are tested by autumnal winds, but are so hardened by these contrarieties as to face the winter manfully.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE "PRIDE" OF THE FAMILY, INDEED!

ALMOST as soon as the Count of Bardannes had coldly-courteously brought his sister into the presence of Madame de Thauzette in the main reception room he left them together. As a witness to the interview, however, the indispensable Thouvenin was placed on guard. Having put his little finger in the machine, as he said, the rest of his body was bound to follow. His was the fate of having to see things to the end. Besides, he began to admire little Martha materially ; fragile, flimsy, delicately dyed as silk may seem, he, as an old worker at such goods at Lyons, knew better than another how strong and tenacious may be the fibres when the strain comes.

She had donned for this farewell to the widow, whom her maid, jealous of the Parisian one, may have designed to rebuke, a simple yet delightful dress. It was composed of pale blue *épinglé* velvet, the bodice of which

was buttoned down the back. The skirt opened on one side to show blue satin pleated, each edge of which was trimmed with blue lace, embroidered with beads of a darker shade, and small squares of pearl fringe. On the plain sleeves pale blue knots were attached, and three similar ones adorned each shoulder, mounted on a bubbling-up of white lace, so to say. Round the fine, long neck was a collar, rather than a mere necklace, of blue pearls.

The widow could not but approve this gentle little lady, and all the more deplored the cross fate that prevented her becoming an addition to her family. With an effort she conquered a hysterical disposition towards tears. Such a task as was before her required plain speaking, and prompt speaking too.

"My poor child," she commenced, "the project of marriage I formed must be cancelled, unfortunately for me."

"Does M. de Thauzette retract his offer?" inquired the startled girl.

"No. It is you who must revoke your acceptance."

"How is that?"

Madame de Thauzette hemmed a little before she could find an excuse that this suddenly sharpened girl would not reject as insufficient.

"Well, I understand that you warned Fernand that if he failed to tell you the truth on any point, you would give him up for ever?"

"That is quite right," with an emphatic nod of the shapely head.

"Consequently, he is going away without any hope to see you again." It was a clever way of bridging the chasm.

"What did he deceive me about?"

"In his fancied freedom to marry."

"A man at his age not know that he was free to marry! Pooh! pooh!" cried the spirited girl. "There is something more than that! I see that my brother was not wrong when he told me that your son was no gentleman!"

This time it was Thouvenin, whom the indignant speaker's eye had caught, that nodded.

"Martha!" ejaculated the Parisian.

"This is so serious, Madame, that I am speaking seriously myself. M. de Thauzette is like the dead to me henceforth! Apart from *his* honour, though, mine is at stake," she resumed, gravely, "and you owe me some explanation? I suppose that he was already engaged to some one else?"

"To Mdlle. Brissot, yes," explained Thouvenin, in the place of the widow, who did not care to utter the bitter name.

"That is why you warned me against her; but how does it come round that this engagement, of which nobody spoke before is so suddenly exploded on me?"

"Denise made it known to your brother."

"When?"

Madame de Thauzette hesitated till the gentleman by-stander once more struck in.

"It was," he said, "when the count announced to Mdlle. Brissot that he had granted your hand to M. de Thauzette."

"Did my brother consent to my marriage?"

"Yes."

"Upon the heels of his prior refusal?" queried the girl, more and more in a puzzle. "Why, why?"

"Because, seeing you determined, no doubt he preferred to avoid the scandal you threatened him with."

"It is very true; I was going to make a noise about it. So Mdlle. Brissot revived her claim, eh?"

"Yes."

"I beg your pardon, ladies," interposed the gentleman who was "seeing fair," for this affirmative gave Martha the wrong phase of the affair. "Your companion only informed the count that M. de Thauzette, very differently pledged to her than to this young lady, had broken all his honourable engagements, probably because Mdlle. Brissot had no fortune."

"I was not aware of this engagement!" cried Madame de Thauzette, loftily.

"The very reason why you would oppose the union

Madame. In short, Captain Brissot, learning of this engagement, of which he was as ignorant as Madame here, *required* De Thauzette to marry his daughter."

"And so De Thauzette marries Denise?" said Martha, seizing on the only point of the hazy explanation which jutted up clear.

"In three weeks' time."

"Where is De Thauzette?"

"Starting for Paris."

"And Denise?"

"She won't be long after him."

"With her father and mother?"

"Her mother alone is going."

"And you, Madame?" as the last inquiry.

"After this conversation, I must take leave of you."

"Are you going with Denise?"

Madame de Thauzette slightly tossed her head.

It was Thouvenin who was to be the two ladies' escort, as we knew before the young girl.

How strange the arrangements seemed just when they ought to have been sitting down to dinner. Instead of drinking the health and happiness of the betrothed couple, and proclaiming it to the neighbours, there was a disruption as if a bombshell had burst. Martha would have gladly lingered from returning to the school with all a maiden's curiosity and interest in wedding preliminaries. But her astonishment turned to con-

sternation when she learnt that her brother was going to Odessa with M. Thouvenin. It is true that the latter kindly invited her to make one of the party, but he frankly added that the country around their terminus was dull, cold, and cheerless as the convent itself. She excused herself quickly from the prospect.

It was, at all events, plain that she was being treated like a child, in so much as the mystery pervading the very air was kept from her. It was evident, too, that she had, more or less unconsciously, been the grain of sand that brings the best machinery to a standstill, or even to the edge of a smash up. Perhaps she would never know the extent of the mischief wrought by her unkind deed. However, it was not done of her own accord, but at the subtle instigation of others. She hoped that there was still time to prevent the evil hovering over the home of her fathers.

Thouvenin sighed as he remained proof to her entreaties; she was such a good-hearted girl when it came to the crisis.

Leaving this rock, she abruptly turned upon the widow.

"Madame," she said, in a strong incisive voice beyond her years, "You know that you are to blame for my having blundered into insulting and threatening one who loved me and who sacrifices herself for me. That is clear, for Denise told me she would save me though it

cost her her life, and even her honour! You have been very wicked! may be you naughty people are proof to remorse; but it would worry me, and I won't have any in my life. You can go and tell your son that he is quite, quite free. But Denise and I fling back the promise that he gave us both. Let him be off—some-where. M. Thouvenin ought to find him a clerkship in some trying climate that will prepare him for where he must go unless he learns to behave properly! Anyway, ever so far from here!"

"Wasp!" murmured Madame de Thauzette, as she took her leave with a grand sweep of her demi-train and a haughty head, "who would have imagined this moth could turn out such a spiteful creature! Well, well, my dear Fernand and myself are well clear of her!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PEACE-MAKER

EVERYBODY under the old rooftree of Bardannes was having his or her quota of profound and momentous reflection. But, because she was not accustomed to cogitate methodically, this occupation fell heaviest on little Martha. In her ignorance of the true state of affairs at present, and still more of what was buried in the past, so little, securely that now it was held by the count, Thouvenin, and Brissot, as well as those more directly concerned, the heiress fancied more and more that she, in her petulance, had tangled their life threads all up into a clue not to be unravelled.

"The fact is," she laid it down to herself, "they cooped me up so tightly at the convent school that I have broken out here like that tun of wine which burst in the cellar at the mere touch of Sister Athanasia, she thinking it was mackerel in brine left over from goodness knows when. At all events, since they have all

gone and shut themselves up in their rooms, the men too, as if to have a good cry, and evidently the dinner will have a wet blanket instead of a cloth—it is I who must cheer them up and bring back the smiles again!"

So she went and found Thouvenin, who was not shut up in a room, but straying in the gardens all alone, his hands in his pockets, his hat tilted down into his eyes—marvellous in one who habitually wore it with provokingly mathematical exactitude—and, as he believed, whistling a lively air. But it had the same monotonous rhythm in it as the buzz of a saw. For once he had not an idea, but he approved of the little intermediatress's carrying out her project to collect all the persons in the dinner-hall. He relied upon the interchange of glances inevitable between the count and Denise fusing any obstacle between, as the electric fluid does any grit in the wire.

Whereupon Martha went to Denise, leaving Thouvenin to bring her brother into the hall, will he, nill he.

She found her pale, and her eyes red with brief but violent weeping. Besides, her trembling hands were hot as fire, and her usually tranquil heart thumped away like an engine. She wasted no words, but fell on her breast at sight, crying out that she blessed and loved her, and beseeching her forgiveness.

On this, being women, they melted into tears together.

"My brother loves you, at which I do not wonder,

for you are a positive dear," said the little lady, as soon as she could speak articulately; "but still the great noodle won't marry you just because you have fancied somebody before him! Why, I, too, fell in love with the same man as you. So, we are a guilty pair. I suppose everybody will refuse me now! Very well, my darling, if marriage is not our portion, you shall come back to the nunnery with me! That will disappoint these odious male persons!"

Leaving her but little time to dress, and so afraid of letting her mother or the maid be alone with her, that she assisted in the dinner toilette, she soon bore her down triumphantly to the great reception room.

Thouvenin exchanged a contented glance with her because he had succeeded, for his part, not simply in detaining the count there, but in decoying the Brissots into the net.

At the entrance of Denise there was a remarkable disposition of nearly everybody to flee, as if the ceiling had cracked preliminarily to its falling in. But Martha ran straight up to her brother, saying, "My dear André, you wanted me to see society before I took the veil. Well, I *have* seen society—as much as I want of it, and it is not at all tempting. In a few months I have met so much wickedness, and I have been so wicked myself, that I want to fly back to the convent; but I do not wish to go there alone."

"Not alone?" they softly echoed, looking round at the still gloomy circle.

She returned to Denise. "Won't you come with me and stay there all the time?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" replied Mdlle. Brissot, exchanging an embrace hearty on both sides.

Martha looked over the shoulder, where her head was momentarily cheek-by-cheek, with a charming air of a conqueror at having settled the problem so beautifully. Then, approaching Brissot, the most moody and unsympathetic of her patients, with the confidence of the fragile mesmerist who soon stupefies the brawny rustic at the fair, she went on, "Dear M. Brissot, as my brother thinks M. de Thauzette unworthy of me, how could I think him deserving of Denise? It is I who am going to rob you of your daughter, but you cannot refuse me, can you? I promise you that nobody will cherish her more than I do. Kiss your father and mother good-bye, Denise dearest, and come along!"

With slowness which did not come from fear Denise went up to her father, but as his brow remained wrinkled and his eye full of sullen fire, she suddenly dropped on her knees. This unexpected and complete submission of the haughty girl touched him at last, for after a pause, during which his entire frame trembled, he, as suddenly though not so completely, wrestled with some success with his pride. He stooped and lifted

her up ; she hid her face in the untightening embrace, and that she was weeping again was to be readily conjectured.

" You have done me as much wrong as was possible," said he, but with more and more freedom as his words were uttered. " Well, since this little angel has risen in your defence, I forgive you and trust you to her."

As she had ventured to lift her head up, he kissed her sorrowfully and forced her, gently enough, to release her hold and go to her mother.

Madame Brissot received her with a cordial hug, but with as reproachful a glance as she dared towards the count, for this was not her solution of the difficulty.

At length the parting was over, and Denise had to accost the Master of Bardannes, the master of her life, if not her happiness.

" This poor guileless child," she began in a voice only heard by him at first, as Thouvenin drew himself away like the others, that the lovers might have the corner of the room to themselves, " your sister, my lord, in her ignorance of real life, thinks her fault equal to mine. But she has found the true way out, the only one that leaves us all in untroubled dignity and imposes no sacrifices above our strength. Let her remain a little while under the belief that it is she who has something to undo !" she continued, piteously, as Bardannes seemed inflexible as that statue of the old Roman in the

corridor beyond. "That will disarm my father. I will repay you for this soon. Good bye, my lord. I am going where I shall have nothing to interrupt my praying Heaven that it will lead across your path the woman with the sweet mission to make you happy "

She concluded with a firm voice, and it was with a firm step, too, that she, after taking Martha's hand, crossed and almost quitted the hall.

"Dash his cursed pride!" began Thouvenin, between his teeth; "'tis a time to wish to be a Mormon or Mahomedan, to marry this noble girl oneself!"

But already, with a cry, all the more startling with its vigour, passion, and power, as the call had been repressed too long and with superhuman effort, the count bounded forward and between the two girls and the door.

"Denise! stop! no!" he had shouted with the ringing tone of a country squire, and not the Parisian fop's. The girl uttered a sigh of relief, and, turning, fell into his arms, her hands over his shoulders, abruptly inert with the intense though instantaneous check to the overjoyed heart.

Talk of ghosts vanishing, with their centuries' experience, swiftly and noiselessly, the most qualified spectre at effacement could have received lessons to advantage of any of the bystanders. They did not merely walk away on tiptoe, holding their breaths, no, no! but faded thence, Thouvenin—not aerial usually—in the van.

At all events, the re-united sweethearts were left alone.

This could not be long, but it was ample for two such exalted hearts to arrive at an understanding which would suffice all their lives.

When the Pontferrands came over to dinner with other guests they met only one disappointment out of the many anticipated by reason of the strange rumours pervading the neighbourhood. The one disappointment was, of course, the absence of the Thanzettes —summoned home by telegraph for a family death, it was said. But as the fear of the widow's costume eclipsing all others was gone with her, this disaster was philosophically borne, particularly by Madame Pontferrand, for her own reasons, and because her husband looked sulky. He had survived a "talking to" which would have transformed Momus into a misanthrope.

But if there were no more disappointments, there were surprises for dessert.

Brissot had risen and toasted Mdlle. de Bardannes, wishing her all the happiness which she showered round.

Rather enigmatical, this ! thought La Pontferrand, who could not repress a saucasin on the *ponche* and the *convent* both getting cold, whilst Martha let her brother return her thanks.

"Oh, madame," said the little lady, with shining eyes,

"do you not know that I am not going to be sent skipping there, but leisurely. At any rate, not till after Denise is married."

"Denise Brissot married?" exclaimed Madame Pontferrand, with a kind of injured mien, since she had a step-daughter to be sacrificed on the hymeneal altar too.
"To whom?"

"Denise Brissot does the Count of Bardannes the honour to become the lady here," said André, with a calm and happy smile.

CHAPTER XXV.

RETRIBUTION.

ON an early day in September Fernand de Thauzette left the railway station at dusk and slowly proceeded towards the little village of Colombes.

It was clear weather, and the sun's heat still lingered somewhat warmly ; nevertheless, the most radiant autumn is felt by everybody as a forerunner of winter, and an air of undeniable sadness weighed upon all things. In the government plantations the authorized wood-cutters were heard lopping off the limbs of fallen trees. Towards the city the silence deepened ; the high factory chimneys had ceased to smoke, and the machinery to rattle and rumble. In the street it died away, except for the crying of patriotic songs by working men making for home. Now and then the stillness was troubled by the slowly reviving wind bringing to the pedestrian's ear the flourish of bugles and the hoof-beats in cadence of a troop

of horse going into or coming out of the fort on the mount.

After having walked on for a good while, more and more slowly and listlessly, Fernand stamped his foot. Like the rush of memories on the drowning man, some freak of his brain urged up a panorama of his young life charged with memories which did not bear investigation after dark. This sinister souvenir was never before exerted with so much power over his heart. This place no more recalled one above any other of particular localities where he had made a conquest. Still he was reminded of all those suburban retreats where champagne and fruit, light music and noisy company, had taken the place of all that poetry which lovers of another kind prefer to have known in their twentieth year.

In another such tranquillity would have soothed the soul so profoundly troubled. He started suddenly, and with violent gesture, as if he was driving an enemy from him, cried out :

“ Who spoke of my first love ? away, blasphemer ; I don’t know which can be called my first ; but I do know I do grant that I have never known another worthy that name ; the rest were only gallantry—still oftener orgies and debauchery.”

His unique love was that passion which Denise had shared with him, and now he felt as if a chimera had

carried him so high that he was seized with giddiness, and, having fallen, was lying bruised among these obnoxious thistles. It seemed to him as if their down, shaken out by his wayward hand till flying in showers out of the cups, took, in floating away, the form of winding sheets. It was death itself that seemed to whisper "Too late!" to his present hope and project.

Indeed, that large, formidable square building which rose among a few trees yonder had as funereal an aspect as the still scarcer ones in the cemetery beside it. It was the goal of his present evening walk. It was the Convent of Colombes, where Martha de Bardannes was passing a couple of months for finishing lessons. After a sojourn here, she was to return home for the New Year's holidays, and "come out" into society. By this time, too, Denise would be perfectly habituated to her new position as wife and countess.

Still the young man blundered on across the common in the thicker darkness, carefully making a circuit of the monastic building and of the burial ground with a still more liberal respect until there was a pale light of the moon rising, but veiled by clouds. The village was so primitive that one would have imagined the old curfew law was still kept there. Not a light glimmered in any of the cabins, and it was rather startling when a sort of will-o'-the-wisp was seen descending the unique street. It was, however, only the beadle or

watchman swinging a lantern and crying in a weather-broken voice :

“ All is safe out of doors ;
Not a breeze on the moors ;
Keep your fires in control—
Sleep in peace each Christian soul ! ”

As Fernand avoided the watchman, and was thus driven nearer the convent, he heard a dog baying within ; but he was prepared for this hindrance, for, going up still nearer to the wall, he threw over it two or three appetising pills, which the dog ran upon with insurmountable rage.

Before he had ground them long between his teeth he fell over on his side, and in ten minutes was no longer capable of interfering with the intruder if he had thought of scaling the rampart.

Fernand was too prudent to attempt any such mad enterprise.

If he threaded his way in the hushed and darkened corridors of the collegiate part of the nunnery, his reason assured him regular rounds would be made, and that, with all his caution, he was certain to be discovered.

He had acquired all the information possible, and studied the place by daylight, though from a distance, with a strong racing-glass. He had settled all his plans within the walls.

A little out from the house itself a poplar tree rose almost to its roof level with still strong boughs at the

third story window. He gathered a number of large stones by rolling them towards the wall so as to form a mounting block reached up to the coping stone, and managed to climb upon the top. He then walked along the wall till he came to the tree ; the branches brushed against the wall, in fact.

A poplar tree is not the most agreeable one in the world to climb, as the arrangement of its boughs are almost perpendicular, but worse to anyone descending through them. On dragging himself upwards, Fernand found in twenty feet that his clothes suffered severely, and that his hands were nastily cut. While he attained the point aimed at, the moon, having become somewhat brighter, beamed through the thin branches where he seemed impaled unto the window opposite him.

Soon he was filled with annoyance by a face appearing at the window, which was not that he desired. But his information was so sure, or at least as much so as a rich purse can command, that he continued to wait, congratulating himself that the fleeting glance of this stranger had not observed him in his ambush.

True enough, before his second hour of impatience was completed, Martha herself opened the window as if attracted by Diana. In a loose white *negligée*, carelessly caught in at her waist and discreetly outlining her figure, she might have been taken for a nymph whom the silvery goddess summoned forth to pay her reverence

Whatever her thoughts, as she took this peep over the country, avoiding a glance towards one side where the cemetery, with its many white crosses, perhaps, would inspire a melancholy mood, they were not unhappy. She even smiled, showing her pearly teeth, which glittered in the moonlight with the delicate colours of the Iris. Her lips moved, but the words they formed were so faintly uttered that, while the beholder's vanity made him wish that it was his name in love, his reason assured him it was only a prayer.

Perhaps she was praying for the happiness of her brother and his newly-wedded wife. At this idea Fernand ground his teeth as if to prevent his execration bursting forth and alarming this graceful apparition at the window.

She must have heard the rustling, though slight, that he caused by this angry movement. A fine charming pink had covered her face, but in a moment a deadly chill drove this away, her pupils dilated, though in the full light, and assumed the steadiness of petrifaction.

As Fernand's face was turned away from the moon and was more or less visible through the darkening network of straight branches it showed him off again in the terrifying aspect of some hideous demon, with ardent eyes that darted upon her the basilisk's glare. Her mouth opened; she was trying to scream out, but

her alarm increased so as to check this exclamation in her throat.

The young man leaned out as far as he dared towards her, and in a hollow whisper, called :

“Not a sound, Martha, or you will ruin all—me, Fernand ! ”

His gaze was a singular mixture of apprehension, respect, and ferocious greed. She recognised who it was at last. But her ordinary courage was sapped and mined by the imminence of the danger to fame, this time at the discovery of it not being a common midnight bandit. She clung to the window-sill with one hand, to prevent herself falling back into the room, thinking that moment, too, that whatever happened, the school-mate (who, according to the rules, was her inevitable sleeping companion) must not see this compromising visitor.

Fernand was afraid to let her come back to her normal senses lest her startled modesty should be more powerful than the lingering love for him, or fear.

It was a desperate thing to do, not so much for the intervening space, but because of wretched foothold. He climbed still higher in the tree on the side towards the house, so that it should lean over with him. He inclined himself sufficiently to catch at one of the curtains, the end of which fluttered free, and drew himself a little nearer. He no sooner planted one foot

on the window-sill than he flung himself forward towards it and released the elastic stem, which flew back into the perpendicular with a furious lashing of the air. He slid into the room, and tried to catch Martha in his arms as she glided away in the obscurity. But already she had uttered a piercing shriek.

In vain he besought her with acute anguish to be calm, to remember that she would rouse the house, to say nothing of her companion. He saw the latter already starting up into a sitting posture, and only for a while too frightened to cry out.

Martha's only answer this time was a burst of laughter—a burst of mad, shrill laughter, which seemed not to depend upon her breath, for it continued to sound, filling the room, trilling down the corridor, and piercing the ears of two-score-and-ten young ladies, who inhabited the dormitory.

His daring leap had frightened her into hysterics. He followed her again a step or two simply because he was at a loss to know what course to take. She fell into a chair, but continued that unnatural laughter. As for her companion, without joining in the mock-hilarity which, no doubt, appalled her as much as the young man's appearance, she had flown to the door, which had been ajar, dashed it full open and flown wildly down the lobby many doors away. Not only on that floor, but above and below, the murmur of many

voices grew louder and stronger. Of course, at the first scream in the house of peace and tranquillity, those who heard it and that nervous laugh could not believe their ears; soon, though, they could not doubt it. They would be dressing in haste and hurrying towards the scene. As for a rush through the midst of the bevy of girls and the more-to-be-dreaded sisters, with the prospect of having, may be, to escape from under the club or spade of the gardeners in the grounds and the gate-keepers, that was an absurd idea.

He glanced round at poor Martha in her violent fit: she had rolled out of the chair on the carpet, but she was still laughing.

Quite a regiment seemed approaching.

There was barely more than enough time to bang the door to and, there being no key or bolt, roll with an exertion of all his strength the iron bedstead hard against it, which, at all events, just gave him a few seconds' start. Even if the fugitive could not give a very clear account of the invader, this barricading the door would prove that there was somebody in the room; and if this disturber could not be reached by the usual method, another entrance would be made in the same direction that he had chosen, but by ladder. If he stayed any longer, his last means of retreat would be cut off. He kneeled down beside Martha, who was still writhing and spasmodically mouthing the final notes of her terrible laugh, and in her ear he whispered: -

"Mdlle. de Bardannes, hear me—Fernand, your Fernand. I must leave you with all possible sorrow for having frightened you so. Alas! I have no excuse but the desperate pitch of my love."

He kissed her on the forehead.

"May our next meeting be the reverse of this cruel one, and this affectionate salute be a renewal of my pledge to have no other love than you."

He went to the window, but twice he recoiled from what seemed—not tempting death, but meeting a death with a thousand simultaneous pangs. Looking at the tree now with all the spearlike branches almost upright, while both fragile and yet strong enough to inflict wounds, perhaps even pierce to the heart, did he dare fling himself into the mass? He tore down the two curtains and united them into one rope, and managed to catch a stem of the tree with the loop, which enclosed some fifteen or twenty of the twigs. This gave him sufficient hold to venture to swing himself downwards and outwards towards the tree so as at least to strike the branches more from the side than upward. He relied upon the attachment of the rope breaking this fall and enabling him to make his foothold secure with comparative leisure. But an unskilled man like him knew nothing of the unsubstantial weaving of modern manufacture, so the knot he had tied slipped a little, then jammed tight so as to give a sharp sudden shock

to the texture, rent the woof and parted from side to side. As Fernand smashed into the branches he was left, therefore, without this support. Snapping the twigs all the way along a rapid fall of ten or fifteen feet, his endeavours to delay if not stop himself, by snatching at hazard, only altered the direction of his course. He fell upon the wall on his shoulder and hip with a force that loosened the coping stone, and thence rolled over to the ground. It is a peculiarity of some terrible crushing falls that the sufferer has his accuracy of sensation impaired, benumbed so to say.

One impulse alone moved him, and seemed to keep away for awhile the agony he ought to have felt. He rose by a miracle, and staggered a distance that seemed almost as incredible. When he was compelled to fall, this time the additions to his bruises elicited a groan, which he instinctively muffled.

The gambler's nature is never to betray a loss, a defeat, or a pain. He was true to his father's temperament.

He crawled on a little further. Nothing more strange and horrible in the shade where this pitiful bit of mortality was crawling like a new Nebuchadnezzar nibbling the herbage, whilst elsewhere the bright moonlight was almost enlivening the landscape. Meanwhile, at the convent where it happened there were no male servants at all available, the rules being excessively

strict ; the more adventurous of the women looked out of the windows and over the walls, but saw nothing of the cause of the night alarm.

In the window of the room where poor Martha, in the first state of an attack of brain-fever, was being taken in hand by two competent nurses a lamp threw a pale yellow gloom out through the white moonrays. The fragments of the torn curtain flapped disagreeably, and the half-detached broken twigs of the fatal poplar rattled against the still vibrating stems.

In the very early morning, by the first train from Paris, arrived two ladies, who had run out to Colombes. They walked over to the cemetery with double veils lowered, and yet one could see there were tears in their eyes somehow. Familiar with the place, they did not trouble to seek the grave-digger, but walked around the wall till they found the spot where time or the curious playing children had lowered the stones into an easily practicable breach. Suddenly the elder of the pair stopped the other by laying her hand on her arm, and said :

“ Wait for me here, Denise. I am rather afraid that you ought not to go any further. Wait, in any case ; I shall not be long.”

The Countess de Bardannes drew her mantle upon her somewhat more closely, for the morning air was chilly, coming far over the level-ground, and patiently

waited. To her tear-dimmed eyes these patches of red smeared over the stones at the opening, attracted no more notice than so many splashes of dew.

Her mother, however, feared that, as sometimes is the case in country churchyards, a body had been brought in over night and left imperfectly covered from the eye until the men should inter it properly in the morning. She pressed on to make sure that there was no reason that her daughter should not proceed also. Drops of blood, though, became more frequent along the way; traces, too, upon the brushed-down grass and dislodged pebbles showed that a heavy body had been dragged or had dragged itself on the very path that she would have taken anyway. Indeed, not so far beyond she saw a recumbent figure stretched out, its head pillow'd on its bent, perhaps broken, arm, so that she could not see the features. But though there was certainly nothing in her mind to enable her to have divined what was forthcoming, she knew before she ventured to uncover its face, half-masked with its hand and clotted blood, that it was the betrayer of her daughter. The last warm drops of his blood had flowed out upon his cold stone pillow, and that pillow of our luxurious youth was the tombstone of his unacknowledged infant. The name "Jean" was filled up with the clotted red, so that it gleamed out glaringly prominent in the early sun-light.

In what a sceptic would esteem mere thoughtless,

mechanical, muscular action, the wretch, wandering to death, had drawn himself all that painful distance to breathe his last upon his son's grave.

Madame Brissot fell down upon her knees and uttered a prayer which was full now of forgiveness. She hastened back to her daughter, and drew her to the station with no precise indication of the horror which she thus spared her.

Not till Madame Brissot was dying, always the housekeeper at the Château of Bardannes, was the sorrowing Madame de Thauzette informed that her son, disfigured beyond recognition, had been put in the paupers' field of Colombes. She had renounced fashionable life some time before, and now shrank into obscurity, her life absolutely broken.

Captain Brissot caught a fatal cold one autumn night, on the watch for poachers, and thus merited to the last the legend "Duty" on his tombstone.

Pontferrand is again a widower, and, moreover, Clarisse is married, so that he runs up to Paris more often and for longer sojourns than heretofore. As for the Lord and Lady of Bardannes, Thouvenin himself looks at them, however searchingly, with a conviction that they enjoy untroubled happiness, and that Denise's past was redeemed by love.

THE END.

